

FORGOTTEN REALMS

REALMS OF THE DRAGONS

Edited by
Philip Athans

THE YEAR OF
ROGUE DRAGONS



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Realms of the Dragons I
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SOULBOUND

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The Year of False Hopes (-646 DR)

Avnon Des the Seer, First Demarch of the Conclave of the Hall of Shadows, awakened from his vision. Something was amiss. He opened his eyes to the darkness of his meditation cell and listened.

Silence. Unusual silence.

The air felt changed. The shadows in the cell appeared more substantive, almost viscous. Pressure made his ears ache, made his head feel thick.

He rose from his prayer mat, pensive, uncertain, and walked to the narrow wooden door of the cell. He lifted the cold metal latch and pushed the door open.

Darkness in the apse beyond, broken only by two wan candles burning atop the square block of an altar. All appeared in order, yet....

The main double doors to the temple stood open and dark. It was midday, yet he could see no light beyond the doors. He could hear no sounds from the city streets outside.

What was happening?

Barely daring to breathe, and with a sense of foreboding heavy enough to bow his shoulders, he moved toward the temple's doors. Some of his fellow demarchs emerged from their meditation cells, others from the doors behind the altar that led into the sanctum.

All shared the same confused look; all muttered the same confused questions.

Like wraiths, they walked toward the doors. They seemed content to let Avnon lead, and he reached them first. He looked out and could not control a gasp.

There was no city beyond the doors, no streets, no carts, no horses, only plains of tall, black grass waving in a soft

breeze.

His heart thumped in his chest. His brethren came up behind him, around him, and their gasps echoed his own.

His legs felt leaden, but he walked through the doors and onto the black-veined marble porch immediately beyond them. He was having trouble finding breath; it was as though the air was too thick to inhale.

All around him was dark, shadows, and gloom.

In his mind, a voice—his voice—kept repeating, "I did not foresee this. I did not foresee this..."

He looked up into the sky and saw no sun, no stars, no twin moons, only black splotches of clouds backlit by some sourceless, sickening ochre light.

"Kesson Rel has stolen the sky," he breathed.

Kesson Rel, the first Chosen of the Shadow God, stood in ankle-deep water and waited for the dragon to show itself. Protective magic sheathed his body, warding him from both physical attack and the dragon's life-draining black breath. Another dweomer allowed him to speak to and understand the dragon in any language the creature might use.

The perpetual dimness of the Shadow Deep did not limit his vision. The swamp stretched in all directions as far as he could see. Flies and bloodsucking insects thronged the air; huge bats wheeled in the sky above. Steaming pools stood here and there, leaking the stink of organic decay. Stands of droopy leafed trees sat forlornly at the edge of the pools.

And roofing it all was the black, starless sky of the Shadow Deep.

Kesson enjoyed the gloom of the place. The Deep felt like home to him. He knew it would eventually drink the life from most mortals. His former fellow demarchs of the Hall of Shadows soon would learn that lesson. They still did not realize fully what he had done, what he planned.

Perhaps Avnon Des foresaw his end? The thought brought a smile to Kesson's face. He—

The insects vanished in a blink. The sounds of the swamp

fell silent. Stillness reigned.

The shadow dragon, Furlinastis, was approaching.

Kesson scanned the sky, looking for the tell-tale cloud of darkness that cloaked the dragon. He saw nothing but the thin, black clouds, backlit by the dim, ochre light of the plane.

A sound behind him, a whisper of movement. He * whirled, the beginnings of a spell on his lips.

Too late.

The dragon leaped toward him, filling his field of vision with a cloud of shadows, scales, and claws. He

had only a moment to marvel at the ability of the creature, as large as a temple, to move in near silence.

The dragon's hind claws hit him with the force of a trebuchet shot, wrapped him in their dark grip, and drove him flat on his back underwater. If his magic had not warded him, all of his ribs would have been shattered under the wyrm's crushing weight. "Even with the magic, the beast's claws managed to score his skin, to squeeze the breath from his lungs. If he didn't act quickly, he would be drowned.

Looking up through the lens of the dark water, he could make out no details. The mammoth form of the dragon looked like a wall of black.

"I smell the protective magic on you, human," the dragon said, and its whispery voice was audible even through the shallow water. "Let us see if it can fill your lungs."

The dragon ground him farther into the mud, farther under the water.

Kesson fought down the instinctive rise of panic that threatened to overwhelm him and gathered his thoughts. As always, he had prepared in his mind several spells that he could activate without words, without components, with only his will.

While his body strained for breath, he triggered with his mind a spell that would move him from one location to another in a blink. When the spell took effect, he vanished

from underneath the dragon and reappeared, wet, muddy, and out of breath, in the shadows of a copse of trees perhaps a stone's throw behind the reptile. With an exercise of will, he pulled the shadows more closely to him, cloaking himself in a darkness that not even the dragon's sight could penetrate.

Despite himself, Kesson found the dragon, a creature of myth on Kesson's home world, awe-inspiring to behold. Black and purple scales, some as large as tower shields, rippled with the movement of the vast muscles and sinews beneath them. Claws as long as swords sank deep into the mud. The dragon's wingspan could shade a castle. And all around the huge body shadows danced, leaking from the creature like steam. Even to Kesson, himself a creature of shadow, the dragon's outline appeared blurred. At the margins, the dragon appeared to meld with the darkness of the plane.

Despite the dragon's majesty, Kesson knew that he was the more powerful servant of the shadows.

Still sheltered by the trees, he began to whisper the words to the first of two compulsions.

The dragon must have sensed that he was no longer under its claw. The great creature whirled a circle, seeking him out, its great head waving hack on forth on the serpentine neck, dark eyes blazing.

"You are near, human," said Furlinastis in his susur-rus voice. "The stink of your invader temple is upon you."

Kesson almost smiled. The Shadowlord's temple was not an invader of the Shadow Deep but an exile. Kesson had moved the temple and all its aspirants there after its ruling conclave had branded him a heretic for drinking from the Chalice. Perhaps later, he would move all of Elgrin Fau into the Shadow Deep, just to watch the City of Silver die in the darkness.

The dragon chuffed the air, searching, searching. Water lapped around its huge feet.

Kesson stepped forth from the obscuring shadows. The dragon's eyes fixed on him and the pupils dilated. The creature reared back its head, no doubt about to exhale a cloud of its life-draining black breath.

"Remain still," Kesson said, and held up his hand.

Power went forth from his palm, the might of his will made manifest and augmented by the power of his spell. It met the will of the dragon, bound it, dominated it—but only barely. It would not last long.

The wyrm stood as still as a statue before Kesson, bound to obey his command. Wisps of shadowstuff leaked from the holes of the reptile's nostrils. The creature's respiration was as loud as a forge bellows.

Kesson waded into the water and stepped nearer the dragon until he stood within reach of its jaws. He felt the dragon continuing to struggle against his spell. Left alone, the dragon would in time escape the magical bondage. But Kesson would not be leaving the dragon alone.

"I will not harm you, beast," Kesson said. "But you will be made to do as I and my god require."

Hearing those words, the dragon strained still harder against the spell—to no avail.

Kesson smiled, stretched forth a hand and laid it on the dragon's scales. The shadows leaking from Kesson's pores mingled with those surrounding Furlinastis.

"It will not be a difficult task," he promised, and ran his fingertips over a scale. It felt cool and smooth beneath his skin, like an amethyst. "You spoke of the invader temple, so I know you know of it. Look at me," he commanded.

Slowly, with palpable reluctance, the power of the spell bent Furlinastis's head down until the dragon's dark eyes fixed upon Kesson. Kesson could see the anger smoldering there, the hate. He thought he had never before seen a creature so hateful of servitude as the dragon. He wondered if all of dragonkind was similarly prideful.

"Once, I served in that temple," Kesson said. "But then the

Shadow God made me his Chosen and allowed me to drink from his Chalice. He subsequently blessed me by transforming my flesh—" he held up his hands to show the dragon the dusky flesh, the sheathe of shadows that encapsulated him—" my spirit, and showing me this world. Rather than a blessing, the Conclave of Demarchs saw my transformation as a mark of transgression. They named me heretic." He licked his lips and controlled his anger. "But I name them fools. As punishment for their foolishness, I used the power bestowed on me to take the temple and all of its occupants from my world to this place, where they will die in the dark for their ignorance. You will kill them."

To that, the dragon could say nothing.

"You wish to speak?" Kesson asked. "Speak then."

His words loosened the binding of the spell enough to free the dragon's tongue.

"Kill them yourself, human," hissed the dragon, and the force of its breath pasted Kesson's cloak to his body. "I am not—"

"Silence," Kesson commanded, and the dragon stopped speaking in mid-sentence.

"I would do so if I could, Furlinastis." He shook his head and smiled at the absurdity. "But I have oathed to never directly take the life of a fellow priest—as have they oathed with regard to me. And those oaths were sealed with the most powerful binding spells known to my people: soul spells. Such spells are unbreakable and impossible to bypass, unless the two souls be willing." He saw the dragon desired again to say something. "Speak."

Furlinastis said, "Your words are nonsense. Your spells but paltry magic that fortune favored this time. And when I am free—"

"Silence," commanded Kesson again, and again Furlinastis fell silent. "You will never be free, dragon. The enchantment that now binds you is but a temporary measure. It is with a

soul spell that I will bind you to me... forever."

Again the dragon strained against the spell, managing in his anger to lift a claw a hand's breadth out of the water. Kesson admired the dragon's strength, but knew it would not be enough.

He began to cast the soul spell, a type of magic unique to his world, a binding fed by the strength of his own spirit. His fingers, leaking shadows, traced an intricate path through the fetid air. His lips spoke the words of power known only to the priests of his people. When he pronounced the last of the words, he felt his soul bifurcate, felt the magic of the spell siphon some small portion of his essence and shunt it to the dragon. There, it diffused into the wyrm's own soul, like a dram of ink dropped into a pail of water, and bound the creature to whatever Kesson might command.

The effort cost Kesson a small part of himself, weakening him enough that he might not have been able to defeat the dragon again had they done battle just then.

"Henceforth, in all things you will obey me," he said, and knew that his voice was pounding like a maul into the creature's brain. "Your first duty is this: every twenty-four hours, you will come to me here and I will give you the name of a priest in the temple. After receiving that name, you will fly thence, take up the named priest, harming no others, and bring him before me."

Kesson imagined how it would feel to look upon his traitorous brothers, one by one, as they died. He wanted them to understand before the end how little they understood the will of their god.

"At my command you will devour the named priest, or perhaps eviscerate him. This you will do until all of the priests within the temple are dead."

Ordering another to kill did not violate his oath. He would see them die, though he could not do it by his own hand.

Kesson knew that forty-four priests of the Shadow God resided within the temple: thirty six

aspirants and initiates, and the eight members of the conclave. He would begin with the aspirants. "Vennit Dar," he said.

The slaughter began with Vennit Dar and continued once every twenty-four hours thereafter for... How long had it been now? Furlinastis wondered. Too long.

The dragon had no qualms about the slaughter of the priests. He simply found it intolerable that the human, Kesson Rel, had bound him with a spell—a soul spell—such that Furlinastis would die to obey any command uttered by the theurge.

Soul magic. Furlinastis had never before heard the term, and hoped never to hear it again. He needed, desperately needed, to free himself of the magic. Like others of his kind, Furlinastis was a force of nature, a thunderstorm in the flesh. And storms could not be bent to another's will, not even that of a theurge.

But he had no inkling of how he might free himself of the spell.

He roared in anger, sending a blast of his life-draining breath streaking into the starless sky. Seething, he beat his wings and soared through the gloom of his home plane. As always, a cloud of shadows enswathed him. A name filled his mind, vibrated in his soul, forced him onward: Nelm Disvan.

Nelm would be the next to die.

Avnon paced the Hall of Shadows. The velvet mask he wore—the symbol of his faith—made him feel as though he was being suffocated, but he resisted the urge to pull it from his face. He knew the urge came from more than merely finding it difficult to breathe. It came from a crisis of faith. The Shadow God appeared to have abandoned them in favor of Kesson Rel, the heretic who had defiled the Chalice. No, Avnon thought; shaking his head. His visions had shown no such divine displeasure, and he and all of the other priests—aspirants, initiates, and members of the conclave alike—still could call upon the Shadow God for spells. Their

god had not abandoned them.

Not now, he thought, not ever.

Kesson Rel had dared drink from the Chalice. As punishment, the Shadow God had marked him an apostate by transforming his flesh. But the god's purpose was inscrutable to Avnon. Perhaps the god wanted to test the temple priests by seeming to favor Kesson for a season. Perhaps he wanted to determine which of them was the stronger: Avnon and the orthodoxy, or Kesson Rel the heretic.

Of course, Avnon already knew the answer. None of the temple's priests could stand against the theurge. Kesson had been the First among them, and after his blasphemy, Avnon had stepped into the theurge's sandals only with reluctance. Avnon was but a simple priest. Kesson commanded both arcane and divine magic, with a skill and power unmatched by any. Even collectively, the entire conclave could not defeat the theurge. Nor could they defeat the dragon that Kesson had recruited to do his bidding. The huge reptile came "daily" to collect the tithe of flesh that Kesson took as recompense for his excommunication. Avnon had no doubt that each priest so taken died horribly, and that Kesson Rel gloated over the kills.

Why did the Shadow God permit it? Avnon wondered. He had no answer. His faith was failing. Would they all die there, on the barren plains of a dim, shadowy hell? So it appeared.

The conclave had attempted to open a portal back to their own world, but it appeared that Kesson Rel had anchored them to the Plane of Shadow when he moved the temple there. The conclave also had discussed fleeing the temple, spreading out and taking their chances on the gloomy plains. But none had been able to get farther than two hundred paces in any direction before bumping up against an invisible force that forbade further travel. The theurge had bound them fully and completely to that single world, to

that single temple, on a clump of dark ground as wide as a long crossbow shot. They were penned animals awaiting their turn at the slaughter. The theurge meant to see them all dead, Avnon knew, and he wanted them to die with terror and faithlessness in their hearts.

At first Avnon and his fellow demarchs had tried to resist the dragon's assault with force of arms and spells. But their incantations and weapons bounced harmlessly off the creature's scales. The dragon had taken care not to kill anyone, but the priests had been and remained powerless to stop the creature. Terror went before it in a wave so powerful that even the most senior of the priests cowered at the dragon's approach.

Each day, the unstoppable reptile left the temple with a single priest grasped in its claws, and over time the demarchs had learned helplessness. Their faith was not failing; it had already failed. Avnon saw it in their eyes. If it had not been ingrained in them by their oaths, Avnon thought his fellow priests might have taken their own lives rather than endure the agony of watching death inevitably approach. But watch they did, and each awaited the daily return of the reptile and its dire pronouncement. They had not

attempted to understand the dragon's speech. They understood enough. The reptile spoke the name of Kesson Rel, and the name of the doomed.

Thirty-five already had been claimed. The next day, the dragon would come for the thirty-sixth. After that, only the conclave would remain.

Kesson had saved the choicest morsels for last.

Avnon sat in the solitude of his meditation cell. His fellow priests had went to do as they would as they waited for death. Some slept, some prayed, some milled aimlessly about. Unprepared to surrender, unwilling to believe that the Shadow God would leave them helpless before the theurge, Avnon sought a vision. He was the Seer of the

Demarch Conclave and his faith could not be shaken, even by recent events. Surely the Shadow God would provide a means to save at least some of his faithful.

Avnon sent his consciousness inward, found his center, and made his mind an open vessel.

With a suddenness that caused his body to spasm, he began to see.

Wings beat in the dark, reptilian scales sprouted mouths lined with teeth, Kesson Rel railed in the shadows, souls floated free in a swamp. He sensed motion, and knew he was seeing time and worlds pass him by. There, in another time, he saw the swamp again, bigger, darker. In it stood two men, a tall, bald man with flesh like Kesson Rel who held in one hand a blade of black steel that leaked shadows, and a smaller, one-eyed man who wielded twin blades. Avnon sensed that, like him, they too served the Shadow God. Together, they faced a dragon—the dragon—but the huge reptile was swathed not only in shadows but in...

Avnon came out of the vision in a startled rush. Sweat covered his clammy skin. His breath came hard. He understood then the purpose of his god, and it frightened him.

Kesson Rel was not a heretic. Nor were the priests of the Hall of Shadows. Both served the Shadow God, and as Avnon had thought, the god wanted to determine which of his servants was the stronger. But the determination was not between Kesson Rel and the demarchs of the temple. It was between Kesson Rel and the two men Avnon had seen in his vision.

Avnon and his fellow demarchs were to play a role in setting up that contest. They were one more challenge for Kesson Rel to face. They were allies of the two men in the vision. He felt stunned by the realization and its implications. For a fleeting moment, but only a moment, he felt betrayed by his god.

And yet he remembered the image of the enshrouded dragon.

With a sigh, he accepted his fate. Men of faith must always suffer, and many men had suffered worse than he would. Besides, he found it distantly satisfying to think that he could die in service to his god's plan. He could die to live.

For the time being, he needed to speak with his fellow priests, to convince them of what they must do. They would not like what he was going to demand but they would do it anyway. He was the First Demarch of the Conclave, and it was the only way.

After he spoke with his fellows, he would need to speak to the dragon.

Below, Furlinastis saw the temple. It sat alone in the barren plains, a rectangle of black-veined marble slabs and fluted columns. As he swooped a wide circle through the dark sky, the few humans outside the temple scurried inside, terrified.

Furlinastis took scant pleasure in their fear. His anger at his bondage denied him even that. For the thirty-sixth time, he ground his fangs against each other and struggled against the soul spell that bound him. For the thirty-sixth time, he failed to overcome the compulsion. The small piece of Kesson Rel's being that infected his soul forced him to obey his charge.

He roared in futile rage as he spiraled downward toward the temple. Still fighting, still failing, he alit and sank his claws into the marble stairs, threw open the huge bronze doors, and spoke his pronouncement into the darkened doorway:

"Kesson Rel sends you greetings, and death. I am sent to retrieve one of your number. Send forth Lorm Diivar. He is the next to die."

The temple was quiet. Furlinastis waited, gouging his claws into the marble of the temple's stairway.

After a time, not one but two priests emerged. Both wore the black masks symbolic of their faith. Furlinastis smelled the fear on both of them. They had not come to fight. The elder of the two held an arm around the younger and spoke

soothingly to him. Pale and weak, the young priest looked up at the dragon.

The power of Kesson Rel's soulbinding allowed Furlinastis to know that the younger of the priests was Lorm Diivar. He extended a foreclaw.

The older priest stepped before younger and said, "My name is Avnon Des the Seer, First Demarch of the Conclave. What is your name, dragon? Are you bound?"

Furlinastis cocked his head. The priests of the temple had never before attempted to communicate with him. He started to answer but the soul magic compelled him to be about his task. He brushed aside the elderly priest and caught Lorm Diivar up.

The young priest went limp in his grasp. Perhaps he was praying. Furlinastis could not tell.

"Maintain your faith, aspirant," the elderly priest called up to Lorm. "Your death is not in vain, nor is our exile here."

Lorm made no reply that Furlinastis could see. He prepared to take wing.

"I see the soul of Kesson Rel on you, dragon," said the elderly priest. "If you would be free of it, the name you pronounce tomorrow must be mine. Do you understand?"

Furlinastis could not reply, though the priest's words struck him like arrows. Free! He leaped into the air and spread his wings. The elderly priest's voice haunted his flight.

"Avnon Des the Seer! Remember it! You must come for me tomorrow or you will remain his slave forever."

Furlinastis devoured Lorm Diivar while Kesson Rel mocked and smiled. The flesh tasted foul and the young priest's screams were unsatisfying. Furlinastis preferred his meat spoiled in his swamp before dining upon it. He also preferred to dine of his own free will.

Afterward, as he scoured with his tongue the last remnants of the human from between his fangs, he thought of the elderly priest's words. Avnon Des had spoken of freedom from Kesson Rel, from the accursed soulbinding that had

made him a slave.

Kesson Rel hovered before him, floating in the air under the power of a spell, lost in thought. Despite his elaborate planning and affected glee, the theurge seemed to take little actual pleasure in the death of his former fellows.

Furlinastis glared hate at the theurge, at the human who had bound him. He decided abruptly that he had nothing to lose by cooperating with Avnon. He was nothing more than a slave to Kesson Rel, a fate that he found worse than death.

To Kesson Rel, he said, "One of the priests, other than the one called, emerged from the temple and offered a challenge."

Kesson looked up from his thoughts, frowned, and asked, "You did not harm him, did you?"

Furlinastis knew that Kesson wanted each of the priests to die before him. He had commanded Furlinastis to kill none, except at his command.

"The challenge was not to me," Furlinastis replied. "It was to you."

"Indeed?" Kesson said, arching an eyebrow. "Which priest? Describe him to me."

Even that slight command triggered the magic of the soul spell and the words poured forth from Furlinastis as of their own accord.

"He was tall and elderly, with black hair graying at the temples. His build was slight and his face was hairless. Like all of them, a mask obscured his eyes. He said his name was Avnon Des the Seer. He seemed unafraid at the mention of your name."

Furlinastis added that last to tweak Kesson's pride. The human's mouth tightened and he crossed his arms across his chest.

"Avnon... Avnon. I had planned to save him for last."

"He named you a heretic," Furlinastis said, recalling the words of Kesson Rel upon their first meeting in the swamp.

The human looked up sharply and glared at Furlinastis. The dragon knew his words had struck home.

"Tomorrow," Kesson said, "journey to the temple and bring back to me Avnon Des the Seer. He will die before this heretic."

The magic of the soul binding sank into Furlinastis's will but he did not resist. He had no lips with which to smile, though he would have if he could.

Twenty-four hours later, Furlinastis again soared over the temple. He saw no scurrying figures below, no hurried motion. The temple was as still as a tomb. He alit on the marble stairs, before the open doors.

From within, he caught the scent of blood. Lots of it.

The binding of the magic took hold and he said, "Kesson Rel sends you greetings. And death. I am sent to retrieve one of your number. Send forth Avnon Des the Seer. He is the next to die."

A figure appeared in the doors. Blood spattered his robes; crimson glistened on his hands; a peculiar aura of shifting darkness surrounded him, not shadows but ... something else. His eyes behind the mask were tired but determined. He walked forward to the dragon.

"You have done well, dragon," Avnon Des said in his deep voice.

The compulsion did not allow Furlinastis time for questions or comments. He took Avnon Des in his claw and took wing. Strangely, it felt as if the priest was squirming in his grasp, though he could see that the human was motionless.

As they flew away from the temple and toward the swamp, the soul spell's grip on him grew less compelling and freed his tongue.

"You spoke of my freedom," he said.

The dragon tried to keep the urgency, the hope, from his tone. He found it odd to be conversing with prey in his claws.

"And you shall have it," the human said, over the rush of the wind.

Furlinastis thought Avnon's voice sounded different, softer, breathier, younger.

"You stink of blood," Furlinastis said. "Did you kill your fellow priests?"

To that, the human said only, "We were of like mind and they were willing."

"The darkness around you..." the dragon said. "What magic is this?"

Avnon Des twisted around in the claw to look up into Furlinastis's eyes. When he spoke, his voice sounded like that of a human female.

"A special kind," he said. "The only kind that can free you." The human looked off into the gloom, thoughtful. "I must see him, speak to him, before this ends. He must have a chance to repent his sins."

Furlinastis snorted, and streamers of shadow went forth from his nostril.

"He repents nothing, human."

"We will see," replied the priest, and his voice was his own.

For a time, they flew in silence. The human continued to feel as though he was wriggling in Furlinastis's grasp, and Furlinastis kept adjusting his grip to compensate. Soon, they would reach the swamp, and Kesson Rel.

"There is more, dragon," the human said. "Before this can be completed, I must have your oath, an oath on your soul."

Furlinastis snarled and pulled the human up before his face—a difficult maneuver while in flight. He hissed a tiny amount of shadowstuff into Avnon's face and squeezed him a little in his claw.

The priest winced, tried to turn away from the life-draining breath.

"No oaths, priest," Furlinastis said. "And no mention of souls."

He had experienced enough of oaths and souls. Avnon Des's

gaze did not waver from behind his mask as he said, "Your oath, dragon, or we will not free you." "We?"

"Oath, dragon!" the human demanded, and his voice sounded as though it were many voices.

The shadows around Furlinastis writhed with his anger. The darkness around the priest swirled as if in answer.

Furlinastis ground his fangs, roared into the sky, and shook the priest in his claw before he finally said, "Very well."

The priest managed to look relieved even through his mask.

"In a time far from now, two men will enter your swamp. The taller will be bald, and will bear a blade of black steel that leaks darkness. The shorter will have only one eye, and will carry twin blades. These are the First and Second of the Shadow God. You will allow them passage without harm and will lend them what aid you can. It is they who will fulfill the will of the Shadow God and destroy Kesson Rel. Oath it, dragon. On your soul."

Furlinastis swallowed his pride and said, "I swear it, priest. On my soul."

At those words, the piece of Kesson Rel that contaminated Furlinastis's soul wriggled in agitation.

The priest sagged in the dragon's grasp. Furlinastis moved his claw and passenger back to the more comfortable flying position. The swamp was near.

"But / will kill Kesson Rel," the dragon said. "After you've freed me from the soul magic."

Avnon spoke, and it sounded again like many voices speaking at once, "It is not for you to kill him. Nor for us."

Furlinastis spiraled downward toward the swamp and replied, "We will see."

He landed on the muddy ground behind a flat stone, almost an altar, that stood on the shore of a shallow, stinking pool. Blood from Avnon's fellow priests still stained the gray stone of the altar brown. The beat of his wings bent the black-leaved trees of the swamp and sent up a mist of water.

Kesson Rel floated above the pool, aloft under the power of a

spell, cloaked in shadows. He eyed Furlinastis's passenger coldly.

As he had with each of the dead priests, Furlinastis set Avnon down on the altar and pressed the point of one of his claws into the human's abdomen. The greasy, squirming feeling surrounding the human's flesh went quiescent, as though trying to be inconspicuous.

Kesson Rel began to laugh—a hateful sound to which Furlinastis had become accustomed. The theurge floated forward, alit on the soft ground, and stood over the prone Avnon.

"Avnon Des," he said, looking down on the captive priest. "I had proposed to save you for last, that you could see the temple and all in it die before you met your own demise."

The priest squirmed under Furlinastis's grasp, trying to free his chest enough to speak.

"You are a heretic, Kesson Rel, and a thief. You drank of the Chalice of Night and thereby made yourself apostate. For that—"

Kesson Rel lunged forward, tore off Avnon's mask, and seized the priest's jaw in his hand.

"And you are a fool, First Demarch, a timid fool. Do you think the Shadow God would have made me this—"

Kesson Rel released the priest and stood back and held up his arms, showing his dusky skin, his yellow eyes, and the shadows that danced around him—"if he did not want me to drink of the Chalice? Do you?"

Under his claw, Furlinastis felt the darkness around the prone priest writhing. Kesson Rel seemed not to notice.

"Repent now, Kesson Rel," Avnon said. "It is not too late. You are the first Chosen of the Shadow God, but you are not his First. Repent, or you will die."

The theurge smiled and said, "I think not." He stared into Avnon's face while he said to Furlinastis, "Eviscerate him, dragon. Slowly."

Keep your promise, priest, Furlinastis thought, as the

soulbinding forced his hand. And I will keep mine.

Furlinastis drove the tip of his foreclaw into Avnon's abdomen.

The priest grimaced, but managed to mouth a prayer. Furlinastis heard the power in the words, though most of them were lost in a bloody gurgle as Avnon's mouth began to fill with blood. Waiting for something, anything to occur, Furlinastis continued to tear open the priest. Avnon did not scream, just continued to pray as he was laid open. The prayer reminded Furlinastis of the words used by Kesson Rel to cast the soul spell that bound him.

When Avnon finally breathed his last, nothing happened. Nothing.

Furlinastis could hardly contain a roar of frustration.

Kesson Rel chuckled and said, "Goodbye, First Demarch."

In that instant, a moan sounded, as though from deep under the swamp, and a black fog rose from the freshly dead corpse of the priest. In that fog, Furlinastis saw shapes, faces.

Souls, he realized. The souls of the priests from the temple. Avnon had killed them all, sacrificed them perhaps, and borne their souls to the swamp in his own body.

Wide eyed, Kesson Rel backed up a step. His gaze went from the fog of souls, to the dragon.

"What have you done, dragon?"

Furlinastis heard the fear in the theurge's voice and knew that Avnon had not lied to him.

Kesson Rel began to cast a spell.

"Freed myself, theurge," Furlinastis replied, and hoped that he was right.

The soul binding still prevented him from harming the theurge, so all he could do was sit, wait, and hope.

The cloud of souls moved from the body of the priest, stretched around Furlinastis's body, and merged with the shadows that always surrounded him.

Instantly, a charge ran along his scales, a tremor of power.

His scales began to burn, to crawl over his flesh. The shadows around him churned. It felt as if millions of insects were crawling beneath his scales, walking along his flesh, biting his skin.

Kesson Rel's voice trailed off before completing his spell.

"Stop, dragon," Kesson Rel screamed. "Stop."

But Furlinastis could not stop.

Furlinastis leaped into the air, writhing, twisting, roaring. The souls swarmed him, covered him. He hissed in agony as the priests burrowed into his being. He felt like daggers were being driven behind his eyes.

"Avnon Des, you betrayed me!" he screamed between roars.

Then he felt it, and knew that he had judged wrongly.

The souls of the priests, all eight of them, permeated his soul, scoured his being until they located the portion of Kesson Rel's soul with which the theurge had

bound Furlinastis. A battle began within Furlinastis, an invisible war that he could sense but not see.

The two sides crashed into each other like warring armies. Furlinastis heard the conflict only dimly, as though from a great distance. Bolts of spiritual energy burst from the sheath of shadows that surrounded him. Distant shouts rang in his ears. Furlinastis felt the binding on the soul spell of the theurge loosen, as though someone was withdrawing a parasite that had wormed its way into the deepest recesses of his flesh.

He felt the chains on his will release, and he was free of the soul binding. The battle in his soul went quiet, though he still felt tension.

Furlinastis's mind turned immediately to vengeance. He ceased his aerial acrobatics and turned his eyes to the ground below, scanning the swamp for Kesson Rel, sniffing the air for the spoor of the theurge.

Nothing. Kesson Rel had fled.

It is not for you to kill him, he thought, recalling Avnon's words. •

Breathing hard, Furlinastis landed atop the stone altar and took it into his claws. He beat his wings, hovered, and cast the sacrificial stone far out into the swamp. It vanished under the dark water.

He alit on a dry patch of ground. There, he pondered.

The seer had sacrificed his brethren and borne the souls to the swamp within his own body. As he died, the priest had cast his own soulspell, one to counter that of Kesson Rel, one that required the power of eight souls to loosen the binding of the theurge.

But why?

Furlinastis looked into the mirror of the still pool and examined the sheath of shadows that enshrouded him. They swirled around and in the swirls Furlinastis saw faces, forms. He realized the truth of it then, and

it gave him a start: The souls of the priests were bound to him. He was their vessel. "Why?" he asked.

A face took shape in the shadows, distorted but visible in the reflection on the pool's surface: Avnon Des.

"His soul remains too, dragon," Avnon mouthed, and his voice was barely a whisper. "We hold it in check; we can no more harm it directly than he could us. We are prisoners so that you might be free."

Furlinastis digested that.

"Remember your oath to us," Avnon said. "The two who will come will free us all."

With that, the face dispersed back into the shadows around his body.

Furlinastis frowned. His will was once again his own, but he owed it to the priests. The shadows around him were a spiritual battlefield, and would remain so for...

How long?

He knew the answer as soon as he asked himself the question: Until the First and the Second of the Shad-owlord find Kesson Rel and kill him.

The wait would be long.

FIRST FLIGHT

Edward Bolme

Netheril Year 3398 (-461 DR)

Serreg kneeled, picked a dead stalk of grass, and inspected it closely. It was withered, with some pale green still trapped in its blades, mocking its vanished vitality. Serreg rolled it in his fingers, then let it drop. He dug into the earth with his hand and loosened a clod. The lifeless dirt crumbled between his fingers, trailing pale dust on the thin breeze. It's happening again, he thought. Serreg stood, took a deep breath, and looked around, hands on hips, at the patch of desiccated vegetation. It was several miles across and perfectly centered beneath the city that floated a half mile over Serreg's head. Delia was Serreg's home, one of the enclaves built on inverted mountaintops that sailed majestically across the skies of Netheril.

Serreg took another deep breath in a vain effort to purge the weight in his heart, then he cast Oberon's flawless teleport to return to his chambers. After years of teleportation, instantaneous travel no longer disoriented the archwizard. He materialized in his chambers already walking across the floor to his desk. Opening one drawer, he pulled forth a small crystal sphere. He held it lightly in one hand and passed the other in front of it. It began to glow with an inner light.

"Sysquemalyn, please deliver this to Lady Polaris promptly," he said. "Thank you."

He passed his hand twice in front of the orb, and spoke again, saying, "Lady Polaris, the land beneath us is also blighted, as if the very life is sucked out of the soil. The grass withers in place. Insects and even small animals lie dead in the shadow of the city. There is no decay. The cycle of life and death is not heading back to rebirth. I shall keep you apprised of my findings."

He turned the hand holding the crystal upside down and the item rolled out of his hand. It floated—light as a soap

bubble, yet purposeful of movement—directly out the window, then turned right toward the Central Keep. Serreg strode out the door.

The archwizard's chambers lay in the innermost circle of Delia, in the palace the city's founder, Lady Polaris, built nearly a thousand years before. People called it the Glade; there had been some sort of garden there originally, and short of the Central Keep where Lady Polaris and her two aides lived, it was the most prestigious neighborhood in Delia.

The city had been built in concentric rings, and Serreg walked easily down one of the radial streets toward the north rim of the enclave. The archwizard had lived in Delia for over two centuries, and he no longer noted the gradual deterioration in the cityscape as he walked ever so slightly downhill from the clean,

elegant lines of the Glade to the peasant's huts and farmers' markets at the rim.

There was no railing around the rim of Delia. Those citizens who ventured near the edge either knew to remain safe, or else they departed the city rather more abruptly than they had intended. But though dangerous (especially on windy days), the rim afforded a gorgeous view. It was like a view from a mountaintop, but without the rest of the mountain in the way.

Nevertheless, for all the panoramic beauty, Serreg's eye drifted to the north, and a touch east, where he knew another patch of dead earth lay, ten miles across. He fancied he could just see a part of that barren patch—and his eye saw something else. A long line started beneath his feet and lightly arced to the barren patch to the north, a trail of wilting grass and pale earth. Whatever blight had struck the land beneath their fair enclave, it had followed Delia as Lady Polaris moved the city to greener pastures.

The land was dying beneath Delia, and without the land, Delia would die as well.

For the next year, Serreg labored intensely, studying the blight. He had the resources of the Delian libraries at his disposal, as well as his decades of scholarship and magical studies. It was gratifying to put his knowledge and studies to tangible, practical use. Such a grave crisis merited the superior mind of the archwizard. He had always wanted to exercise his power in a serious pursuit like smiting the enclave of Doubloon, destroying the Lich of Buoyance, or something else of - that order. While the puzzle of the crop blight was not as immediately gratifying as combat would be, the challenge at least carried mortal stakes.

Alchemical analysis determined that the enclave had not been altered. No insidious plague lingered on the underside of Delia's granite, and the city's shadow had no strange new side effect. Of the dead creatures themselves, they could not be resurrected, which implied that whatever spark gave them life had been utterly crushed. Test animals placed anywhere within the area of the blight suffered a similar fate, despite the efforts of Serreg and the temple healers to preserve their essence. Once removed from the zone, the subjects resumed normal lives, if a bit weakened ever after.

Lady Polaris moved Delia twice during that year at Serreg's behest, and each time the blight followed the city's path exactly. The radius of the blight below expanded as Delia remained stationary over that spot. In a similar manner, the width of the blighted trail left in Delia's wake varied inversely with the speed with which the enclave moved.

Throughout his researches, Serreg assiduously recorded small anomalies in a separate tome reserved for that purpose. Minor mysteries all, and hardly worth note, except that they persisted as Serreg pursued this research.

Then Serreg began adding unrelated news into this journal. Quasimagical items that had functioned perfectly for scores of years intermittently failed. Illnesses increased in lethality, especially among the elderly. Serreg himself saw a rather dramatic failure of the enclave's longevity field take place

on the streets of the Grove. One of the more revered tutors of the magical college aged from his apparent fifty years to his true age of over four hundred. Within the space of a breath he withered, died, and crumbled to dust.

The entries in the journal began to fit an insidious pattern, but Serreg could not tie together the magical failures with the death of the ground-dwelling creatures below.

Serreg attempted detections and divinations, revelations and dispellings, but none produced any answers. Yet all the negative results pointed to something that hid itself. Eventually he came to the inescapable conclusion that Delia suffered from a vast and powerful spell, too subtle and carefully woven for even an archwizard to unveil. At least not directly.

Rather than find out the spell's purpose, Serreg turned his attention to finding out who was casting it. He began by eliminating those who weren't casting it. Through careful examination, he removed specific people as well as potential vectors, one by one. It wasn't Karsus, thankfully, for who wanted to engage in battle against the premier Netherese archwizard? It wasn't extraplanar in origin, again thankfully, for Serreg had little desire to combat creatures from other dimensions. The blight did not hail from Realmspace, nor from any of the gods. Serreg's divinations also cleared the Lich of Buoyance, to his small displeasure.

Every so often, Serreg would get close, and he'd feel the spell squirming to evade his scrying eyes. He was never sure if the spell itself took action to evade definition, or if the practitioners behind the magic made adjustments to keep it out of Serreg's hands, but every instance gave the Delian archwizard a better idea what was happening.

And at long last, he had enough information to try a field test.

Again he drew a small crystal ball from his desk drawer, and waved his hand to activate it.

"Lady Polaris, Candlemas, and Sysquemalyn—I have narrowed the source of the blight as well as I can, and it appears to be subterranean in origin. Deeply subterranean. There is no doubt in my mind that the dwarves are innocent, because they do not delve to the depths from which the spell originates. I wager they also lack the subtlety to weave a spell of this nature.

"In any event, I cannot pursue this further from the laboratory, so I shall go and test my hypothesis in the field. I may come back empty-handed, but I think it is far more likely that I shall uncover the source of this evil magic, and show them what it means to cross a Netherese archwizard. In any event, I should be back within a few hours at most, and I shall report to you my results. Keep a supper warm for me. Good day."

He let the orb go, and by the time it reached the window, the study was empty.

Serreg arrived—magically, of course—shortly before sundown at the location he had chosen. He placed everburning lights around the area, in case his efforts required more than an hour.

He closed his eyes and clasped his hands for a few minutes to cleanse himself of the excitement and impatience that tugged at his mind. Though eager to pull aside the last veil over the spell, he knew he must be careful, lest his eagerness alert those behind the blight, and they slither away from him once again.

Once relaxed, he ensorcelled himself with Zahn's seeing and began to dig using Proctiv's earthmove incantations. As he dug, his mind's eye scouted ahead with the seeing enchantment, looking for any hollow areas under the ground wherein creatures might lair. On finding a small fissure, he widened it all the way to the surface. He picked up one of his lights and dropped it down the cleft, then used the earthmove spell and began following the fissure down, digging as he went.

Well after dark, he finally found what he was looking for—or, more precisely, what he was looking for found him.

His excavations had settled into a dreary routine, taking far longer than expected. The constant rumble of earth being moved, the continuous projection of his vision, and the endless standing as he wrought his magic all taxed Serreg's alertness, lulling him into a casual state of mind not unlike his long hours spent in one of the university laboratories.

As he had done several times before, Serreg paused briefly from his exertions, suspending his spells to slake his thirst with a sip of water. As he recorked his flask, however, he noticed that something was different.

The sound of moving earth hadn't stopped.

He looked quickly at his excavation; it sat there undisturbed. The sound came from behind him. He stepped back and turned his head toward the noise, and as he did he realized that there was more than one source. Something disturbed the earth to his right, and something else did the same on his left.

Seeing nothing, Serreg briefly closed his eyes and took a deep breath to purge himself of surprise. Facing the sources of the noise, he adopted a prepared stance, feet shoulder width apart and hands in front of his abdomen with his fingertips touching lightly, all as he had been taught in the martial spellcasting courses. He stared at the empty space between the sounds. He was ready.

And frankly, he was relieved to be interrupted. It saved him the trouble of hunting the miscreants down. Once his surprise passed, Serreg didn't even think to be frightened. After all, what did a Netherese archwizard have to fear from any but his own kind? He simply prepared his mind to deal with whatever creatures

might come forth. Kill all but one, and trap the last for detailed interrogation. Then, if it turned out to be something new, perform an intensive autopsy.

At the edge of the illumination from one of his stones, Serreg

saw the surface tremble, crack, and heave upward. He smiled slightly and waited.

The ground rose higher, pushed from below, and as it did so it tumbled to the side, until Serreg saw the creature itself rising out of the dirt. At first, he saw a flurry of hands, perhaps three or four, pushing the earth to the side. Vile-looking hands they were, shaped in some unsettlingly inhuman fashion with long, wicked fingers that seemed to end in talons. Then dark, bulbous flesh pushed itself out of the ground, a wad of meat a good fathom wide. As it rose, Serreg saw the beast's arms retract wholly into the puckered tissue.

The creature continued to rise, though Serreg saw no obvious means of movement. It rose from the ground as a dead fish rises from a fishmonger's barrel, pulled forth by the hook through its mouth. As more of the creature's body hove into view, it narrowed toward the tail, adding to the image of a dead fish. Serreg raised one eyebrow in interest. Long, blunt spines, slightly curved, covered the majority of the shapeless body; perhaps a grotesque decoration, perhaps a defense, perhaps some kind of bizarre full-body system of legs.

The creature rose further, leaving behind an open hole in the ground, somehow all the more repulsive for the sickening creature that floated placidly out of the wound. Fully eight feet of nauseating monster had risen from the cavity by the time its width had diminished to the thickness of Serreg's leg. He watched as another yard emerged from the ground, ending in a vicious barbed tail.

The beast turned itself more or less horizontal, lounging in the air, with its tail drifting slowly back and forth. It turned its rounded front toward Serreg, and he saw a puckered mouth with countless hooked teeth all gnashed together in the center. "Fascinating," said Serreg. He would definitely have to bring the creature back. "Serreg's subterranean tubuloids," he would call them. Ah,

the immortality of discovery!

He did not notice that the speed of the wind began changing unnaturally around him.

Well, best get to work, he thought, and cast Aksa's morphing upon the creature.

He intended to alter the beast into what it first reminded him of: a fish. There on the open plain, a fish could easily be caught and transported back to Delia. Once back in the safety of one of the university laboratories, he could return the thing to its natural state.

Serreg was rather affronted when the morphing failed, and the magical power frittered itself away, flickering across the thing's flesh and jumping from spine to spine.

Annoyed, Serreg cast Mavin's flesh-stone transmutation on the beast. An eleven-foot-long statue would be more tedious to transport, requiring telekinesis and all, but on the other hand stone was much less slimy than a flopping fish, and petrification afforded the stupid beast no opportunity to bite him.

That spell failed as well.

Serreg paused. Eitheir haste from the excitement of discovery ruined his spellcasting, or else the grotesque abomination was highly resistant to magic. Serreg preferred to consider the former to be the case. He began to cast Pockall's monster hex, a spell with which he was quite well versed as he practiced it regularly on laboratory animals. But as he gathered the energy and spun the incantation, the creature opened its

mouth, a vile circular maw full of mismatched jagged teeth arranged around the rim in no particular order. Serreg fought to keep his mind focused on finishing the incantation..

The creature lunged. Its four arms flew out from its body, erupting from the soft flesh into which they had withdrawn. The mouth gaped open far wider than Serreg had thought possible. Reflexively, Serreg abandoned his spell, its power dispersing harmlessly while he flopped onto his back under

the speeding bulk of the monstrosity.

The thing swept almost soundlessly over him. Serreg reflected for just a moment that no matter how intensive one's combat spellcasting training might be, it was always very easy to panic in the field. That flash of realization crystallized his discipline, and Serreg drew upon the countless hours of repetitive drills he'd performed. He rolled quickly to his feet, and as he rolled, his arms also flew through the requisite gestures for General Matick's missile. It was a basic technique, but a very useful one. No sooner did Serreg finish the incantation than he pushed himself to his feet and aimed the magical strike.

The creature passed over one of his light stones and was lit repulsively from below as it turned back toward Serreg. He fired the spell, and a cluster of tiny red flares shot from his finger toward the beast. They arced in and impacted its hide, flaring as they struck the creature with their deadly energy.

The monster seemed not to notice. Even a horse will flick its hide from a horsefly's bite, but Serreg saw not even that much of an expression of annoyance from the thing.

! With the amazing speed born of fury, Serreg cast another, more powerful attack spell: Noanar's fireball. As the creature turned to attack him again he sent the

blazing ball of flames straight into the monster's open mouth. His aim was perfect, and the creature drew up short and screamed in a strange, monotone hoot. Despite the alien sound, Serreg knew he had struck a solid blow.

The flames died out rapidly, and in the dim light of his globes, Serreg saw the beast wagging its body back and forth. He saw the blackened teeth framed by blistered skin, and spittle and ichor being slung about as the creature wagged its... its head?... to clear the pain.

Serreg started to smile in conquest. But instinct tempted him to look over his shoulder instead.

Two more of the horrid things hung stationary in the air

behind him.

As he blinked in surprise, the multiple arms of the two creatures issued forth, and began making mystical passes in the air. Serreg glanced back at the wounded beast and saw that it, too, wove a spell.

They had him surrounded.

He sprinted away, not caring which direction he took. He zigged and zagged as the obscene taloned hands of the three subterranean slugs launched magical spells. A crack of raw magical power flew past him to one side. Another spell of unknown nature ripped the ground open a few yards behind him, and just as he thought himself lucky, a wave of magical frost struck him from behind. It hit like a gale, cutting through his archwizard's vestments and biting his flesh. The impact knocked Serreg off his feet, and the sudden drop in temperature made his back arch.

Too cold to shiver, Serreg stood. The three creatures studied him. One cast another spell as he rose, too quickly for Serreg to dodge or counter, and he found himself framed in flickering red light.

Enough, he thought, and pulled one of the most powerful spells he knew to the forefront of his mind, something to burn all three of these vile things: Vblhm's chaining.

Serreg's eyes glowed with raw power as he quickly moved through the invocation. He watched with grim satisfaction as the three creatures gathered together and closed upon him. He launched the spell. A thick bolt of electrical power sprang from his fingers, a bolt of lightning that struck the lead creature, then arced to the other two. For a moment, the power of Serreg's attack illuminated the entire area.

By that light, Serreg clearly saw that only one of the creatures flinched. And the one he'd already wounded, he watched as the arcing lightning bolt erased the fire's blisters, healing the monstrous being with its magical power. The lightning bolt never grounded itself out as it was

supposed to. The creature had sucked in all the power Serreg had just spent trying to kill it.

Vblhm's chaining. One of the best spells he knew. And still they came. Not only did they resist magic, they could absorb the raw energy to give themselves more power.

Dumbfounded, Serreg had no idea how to defeat them. Then one of them cast a spell, a maddeningly familiar one, yet one Serreg knew he had never seen before, and the light globes all dimmed and went out, leaving him in the dead of night, with those things... and a flickering red halo.

Serreg knew panic.

For his whole life, his power had been his magic, and suddenly it was utterly useless. The scaffolding of decades of training collapsed beneath him, leaving him in the terror of uncontrolled freefall, falling into a darkness filled with those hideous creatures.

He sensed them moving closer. Serreg knew he couldn't outrun them, so he desperately gambled with

Oberon's flawless teleport. East, toward the enclave, toward Delia.

Even as he cast the spell, Serreg felt one of the things try to counter it, while another clutched at him with its claws. Praying they had not interfered too greatly, Serreg submitted himself to his spell and vanished.

He reappeared several miles away, safely close to the ground. The spell collapsed around him just as he exited its effect, but that didn't matter. He'd gotten away! He exhaled explosively, free from the panic that had gripped him. The lightness in his head caused him to stagger briefly, and he almost laughed, feeling the giddy release of tension.

Then the flickering red aura around him flared into brilliant life, a beacon in the night. They had done that, to find where he'd gone. Serreg frantically summoned the most potent dispelling he could muster, cast it, and watched in relief as the flickering light vanished.

He knew he had at least a few minutes before the

subterranean obscenities could reach him. They didn't look like they moved that fast. He took a few deep, panting breaths to get his heart and lungs under control, then wracked his brain for spells. To his horror, he sensed his spells fading, their power draining from his mind like the life had been drained from the soil beneath Delia.

That's how they do it! he thought in alarm. A huge spell, sucking the life and magic out of our enclave like a ghoulish sucking the marrow from our bones!

Everything was clear. The intermittent failures of magical items, spells abruptly collapsing without warning, the odd side effects as he tried to pursue his investigation through magical means. They intended to drain Delia of all life and magic. The dirt and all its plants and animals just happened to be in the way.

At long last, Serreg knew who was behind the blight, and how it worked. But it was too late.

They were after him. They probably even knew he knew. They had been watching him all along, trying to prevent him from finding them, concealing their dark enchantment, interfering with his magic. And they had just tapped his very mind and drained away the arcane power of the spells he knew.

He had nothing left but himself. He had to hide. On that open plain, they'd find him easily. Frantically, he looked around, and barely visible as a shadow against the stars, he saw a ridge jutting out of the plains, about a mile east.

His only hope lay in that ridge, and somehow blending in with it, finding a cave or a large rock to crawl under or a large bush or something to use for cover. He couldn't let them find him. He had to live. He had to warn the others.

He ran.

After only a hundred yards his lungs burned within his breast. His legs protested the sudden advent of intense physical labor. His whole body complained. He started stumbling, open mouthed, with spittle dangling from his

chin, but fear pushed him on.

Panting madly, he reached the foot of the ridge, which jutted like a dragon's spine out of the plains. He climbed, randomly exploring those places that were easiest to reach. After several agonizing minutes' search, he scrabbled up to a small cleft barely visible in the moonlight. He wormed his body backward into the crevice, frantically scanning the starlit sky to the west. Even with rough rock on all sides, his bruised and raw hands tried to push him even deeper into the crack. His ribs protested the strain, but he did not relent, for it seemed that the stones themselves wanted to push him back out into the night, out where they were looking for him.

He blinked the sweat out of his eyes, salty tears of fright already gone icy in the cold night air. His heart, too was chilled, and his soul felt the toll the creature's had taken, stealing his life-force itself. One of the creatures screeched in the darkness, a horrid, alien sound.

"Please," he gasped, using the word for the first time in his life. "Please... someone... anyone... help me!"

Half of his brain desperately pleaded for aid, any aid, while the other half ;astigated itself for panicking. Self-control and reason were needed then, not pointless calls for help. No one was near. No one but them_____

Serreg heard a clash of steel on steel, a burst of melee fighting close at hand, and his heart caved.

They've found me! he thought. But wait—they weren't carrying weapons...

No sooner did that realization cross the rational half of his brain than a flash of light winced his eyes. A star-burst of swords, axes, and spears clashed and sparked in the darkness, erupting like a vicious steel flower blooming in an instant, flowing outward with strokes and parries like a smoke ring, then vanishing as a tall, powerfully-built man stepped out of its midst.

Serreg stared in frank shock, his contorted body frozen in

the crevice.

The man was a giant. He stood nine feet tall, and Serreg couldn't understand how he'd stepped out of a small ring of moving steel without cutting himself, let alone stooping over. He had the proud, easy, alert stance of the warrior. He looked askance at Serreg, keeping one ear alert while focusing most of his attention on the hapless fugitive wedged in the rock.

"Well, now," said the giant, with a deep and gravelly voice. It reminded Serreg of steel-shod boots marching over bones, or boulders catapulting into the masonry of castle walls. "A helpless archwizard. That's not something you see every day."

Serreg's eyes traveled down the length of the visitor's body. He was unshaven, and his nose had been broken multiple times, but he was no less handsome for it. His broad, battle-scarred chest was bare, protected only by the cloak that covered his wide shoulders. His arms, all— all three, no, four... or five... well, all that Serreg could see... all carried weapons: a spear, a scimitar, an axe, a war flail's spiked heads dangling near his ankles, and a skull wielded like a club, gripped with fingers through the eye sockets and thumb under the teeth.

The giant cocked his head and asked, "Do you talk, boy? Or was that magic, too?"

"Wh—why—?" Serreg stammered.

"You called for help," said the giant, spreading his many arms, "and here I am."

Serreg's brow furrowed. Called for help? Yes, he supposed in his panicked state he must have. It didn't matter. Help had come.

"So... what—uh, who are you?"

"Psshht!" guffawed the giant. "You really are helpless, aren't you?"

He turned away and scanned the landscape. Serreg felt affronted that he no longer merited the giant's attention.

"But... but I don't-"

"I am Targus."

For a long time there was silence, broken only by the delicate drip-drip of droplets steadily dribbling from the hem of the giant's cloak.

"Targus," said Serreg finally.

Targus's head swiveled from side to side as he smelled the air.

"Targus," said Serreg again.

The giant ignored him. "Lord of War," added Serreg.

"Yes," replied Targus simply. He turned to face Serreg again, and snorted. "That's all right with you, isn't it?"

"Wh-what are you doing here?" asked Serreg.

"You called," answered Targus with a shrug.

"But—but you're a god!" blurted Serreg.

"So? I had a whim to answer you." There was something awfully frightful about that voice, thick with death and carnage, speaking whimsically. Serreg surmised Targus could speak of rape and slaughter with equal aplomb. "You ought to be thankful, since the only other possible help is three tired farmers a few dozen leagues from here." Targus looked pointedly at Serreg, who mutely nodded his assent.

"Besides," the god added, "you have potential."

"All right..."

Targus stepped forward, put one heavy boot on a rock outcropping, and leaned over Serreg in the crevice. Serreg wasn't sure how he fit his massive bulk into that small crack, but then again, he was a god.

"So," said Targus with a conspiratorial wink, "I'm here. What do you want?"

"What do you mean?" asked Serreg.

The mere presence of a god had eclipsed all other considerations at that moment.

"You asked for help," said Targus reasonably. "What sort of help would you like?"

Serreg thought about it for a moment, and an idea struck

him

But before he spoke, Targus, seeing the glint in Serreg's eye, interjected, "Understand that I will not fight your battles for you. I am the supreme general, and while I give my troops the best odds of winning, it's up to foot soldiers like you to do the fighting."

Curse the luck, thought Serreg, selfishly ignoring the amazing good fortune that had caused his frantic plea to catch the ear of a god.

He thought some more, carefully formulating his answer.

"What I would like," he said, "is a weapon. A physical weapon, because spells do no good. Something small and light, like a knife or an ice pick, because I haven't had military training. I want this weapon to inflict great damage. And I also want it to grant me powers."

Targus pursed his lips knowingly and replied, "Powers? Plural? No. Were I to grant you that, we'd be here all night listening to you prattle off your avarice. Choose one, and be quick."

"I want it to polymorph me, changing me from one creature to another, in such a manner that those things out there can't steal the magic away."

Targus grinned broadly.

"As you wish," he said. "You'll have your weapon. But be careful, because it likes to draw blood." He bowed ever so slightly. "Good evening, good luck, and I hope you live up to your potential."

The giant collapsed in on himself, leaving nothing but the echo of a thousand screams and war cries, and a cloud of droplets suspended five feet off the ground. Serreg saw a dagger hanging in the center of the mist. He grasped the handle, surprised at the warmth of the supernatural fog. As he pulled the dagger closer to inspect it, three things struck him at once.

It was a beautiful dagger, exquisitely wrought and decorated.

His hand was covered with warm blood.

The night insects started chirping again.

Until that instant, Serreg hadn't even realized they'd stopped. His intuition told him that the entire conversation had occurred outside of time, suspended on a whim by Targus. That meant the demons were close....

Serreg heard a grunting moan, and saw a dark bulk rise in the darkness, blotting out the stars behind it. He turned the dagger blade down in his hand and gripped it tightly. The thing came closer. Its four arms waved gracelessly, tracing embers of magical fire in the night. It abruptly turned toward him in a manner that indicated it had noticed him in his hiding place. The creature made a few mystic passes with its arms, spinning an incantation. A web of phosphor spread all around the monster, Serreg, and the cleft, then vanished.

Concealment, thought Serreg. It wants me all to itself.

The creature paused, swimming back and forth for a moment, and Serreg had the distinctly unpleasant sensation that it was studying not him, but his dagger.

Then without further preamble or caution, it charged straight for him. It seized Serreg's torso with two of its four arms and hauled him out of the cleft, while the other two grabbed his head to maneuver it toward the gaping, spiny-toothed maw.

Serreg desperately plunged the dagger into the creature's mouth, sinking the weapon up to the hilt into the pulpy flesh behind the teeth. The thing screamed, an unholy and utterly alien monotone cry, and suddenly the creature was eight times as large, filling the sky, and Serreg fell from its loosened grip.

How did he get so high up? He had no time to consider that, so instead he spun his tail around to land on his feet, and ran. The ridge seemed much larger than it had before. He leaped for a rock outcropping, landing nimbly on his forelegs and pushing off with the back, just in time to—

Forelegs? thought Serreg.

He quickly scurried behind the outcropping and hid. The moaning creature nursed its wound on the far side of the rock, so Serreg chanced a look down at his paws.

Paws?

He had two furry forelegs ending in paws. He lifted one up, flexed the claws, and stared. His tail twitched in irritation and confusion, because he—

He looked over his shoulder to see haunches and a lashing tail, all covered in soft tabby fur.

He was a cat.

A cat? Well, he hadn't wished to be a cat, never told the dagger to change his shape, but it had anyway. Fair enough. But where was the dagger? For that matter, where were his clothes? He looked at his claws again, and sure enough, one of the claws on his right paw glinted merrily in the moonlight.

He smiled. All he had to do was change into a sparrow and dart out of there. A sparrow would be very tough to follow, and he knew he could out fly one of those things. Heck, once he got away from the immediate vicinity, he could become a falcon and really put some speed on.

He looked at his claw and gave the mental command: Change me into a sparrow.

Nothing happened.

I command you to change me into a sparrow.

Nothing. Did it have to be verbal?

"Rreeooowwf, he said as quietly as he could.

Again, he started to panic. How could he command the dagger if he could only howl like a cat? But wait—he'd never asked to be a cat in the first place, it just—

A great, cold hand with two opposable thumbs plucked him off the ground. He wriggled and writhed, knowing how hard it is to hold an uncooperative cat, but the thing held him fast. Three other arms spun spells of divination upon him to discern the cause for his change, and perhaps to try to undo it.

The vile creature gave up quickly, however, much to Serreg's dismay. Instead, the maw opened wide to swallow Serreg whole. Desperately the tabby archwizard attacked the creature's thick skin, using his pathetic little weapons of tooth and nail. It was like trying to bite a wall, or scratch stone. He looked up as the mouth drew closer, filling his vision, and amidst a new frenzy of struggle, he felt himself change again.

The world shrank around him, and the powerful hand that held him diminished in size and strength, shifting quickly from an iron band around his body to an unfriendly mitt trying to scratch at his ribs. Serreg's instincts told him he was at an awkward angle, his body too vertical and too close to the ground, so he beat his wings rapidly to get his center of gravity back under control.

The evil abomination gaped at the sudden transformation, four arms wide in shock and spiny mouth formed into a perfect ugly circle. Serreg hissed, craning his head forward. He flew upward a few dozen feet and settled upon a rocky pinnacle. The creature rotated its loathsome body to follow his movements.

Quickly, Serreg looked down to take inventory. Two reptilian claws clutched the promontory, and two leathery wings hung at either side. A wyvern?

Thus distracted, Serreg did not see the beast gather itself and lunge at him. Its massive bulk impacted Serreg's body, and the fangs bit into his exposed side. Four arms scrabbled for a grip on Serreg's scaly hide. Reflexively, Serreg thrust with his stinger tail, bones and sinews straining with the strike. As the poisoned barb flew past his head, he caught the briefest metallic

glimmer, then the stinger plunged deep into the monster's body, pumping poison as it went.

The creature grew in size again, and Serreg slipped through its outstretched arms and fell. Looking down, he saw the ridge slope clearly, and he knew an impact was coming. He

pinwheeled his arms to right himself, hit the ground hard, and tumbled and slid for more than thirty feet before coming to an abrupt and painful stop against a bush.

He looked up. The abyssal monstrosity writhed in the air, black blood dribbling down its side. It turned toward him, bellowing in its singular voice, and Serreg tightened his grip on the dagger. Thankfully, he hadn't lost his grip on it when he fell. The beast moved toward him, but then abruptly deflated of menace and sank a few feet toward the ground. The arms started to retract, then grew limp. Its barbed tail swished a few times back and forth, then quivered and was still.

His dagger held defensively in front of him, Serreg moved back up the rocky slope. The beast hung above the ground, dead, yet still suspended seven feet in the air. Its arms dangled and bloody drool oozed its way out of the grotesque mouth, but the tail was still raised.

Serreg inspected the creature—as much as he could without getting too close. He saw the gaping wound his stinger had left, saw the single scratch on one of the wrists from his claw. The blood from the mouth attested to his first dagger thrust. Odd that I can see so clearly in the dark, he thought.

He looked down at his hand. It was a hand all right, but not human—rougher, more powerful. His clothes were his, somewhat the worse for wear though nonetheless the robes of an archwizard, but they no longer fit properly.

His callused fingers found a wide face with low cheekbones and a sloping forehead. Small tusks sprouted from his mouth under a snotty nose.

"An ore?" he said, his voice muddy and unrefined. "Well, at leasht I can shpeak."

He cast a subtle detection spell, and discerned that the evil creature's concealing weave still stood. Confident that the others were unaware of the monstrosity's demise, Serreg limped back down the ridge, his dagger dangling from one tired hand.

He turned westward, doubling back on his original flight, hoping that the other things would search for him farther east. He increased his speed from a stagger to a walk, then to a jog, and even a bit better than that. Trotting along, he found he rather appreciated his ore body. His eyes pierced the darkness easily. The pain in ribs and wrist impeded him less than he expected; perhaps an ore's nervous system was partially inured to pain. He loped along at a good clip without getting appreciably winded. His muscles were tireless and his piggy snout with wide, flaring nostrils was ideally suited to bring in large quantities of air. True, the constant dribble of snot affronted his cultured upbringing, but he would happily endure that disgrace to get farther away from those nightmarish beasts.

He moved throughout the hours of darkness, ever to the west, finding a good steady pace he could maintain for hours. As he trotted, he contemplated the dagger in his hand and the position it had put him in, somehow blaming the dagger for his plight more than he blamed the hulking beast it had killed for him.

That the blade was priceless went without saying. It was a gift from a god—a god!—and though no one would ever believe the tale, its powers were unquestionable. It had slain a hulking brute that his magic hadn't even singed, and it had changed his shape, what, three

times already? If only he could learn how to control it, what power he would have! Soar up to Karsus Enclave on the wings of a nighthawk, sneak through the city streets as a cat, change to a gnat to penetrate a gap in any locked window—there was a thought! A gnat with the intelligence and magical powers of an archwizard! No secret would be safe. All those other archwizards, scheming and plotting against Delia, trying to destroy his enclave and his people, their secrets would be exposed, their plans foiled! But it all depended on that damnable dagger....

Serreg tried to force the weapon to change his shape for

him. He tried every incantation he knew, and as many religious supplications as he could bring to mind or invent. He expressed the desire as a wish, a command, and a bargain; verbally, mentally, and to the best of his ability, kinesthetically. He tried drawing his own blood with the blade to activate the ability, as well as spitting on it, sweating on it, kissing it, and eventually, cursing at it. Nothing worked.

By daybreak, after a full night's run and endless hours spent beating his will fruitlessly against the magic blade, Serreg was ready to quit. He'd survived those monsters he had unwittingly unearthed, so why bother with this thrice-damned intractable item anymore? His tired brain could think of no reason. He'd just throw the blade, sling it hard, get it away from him, be done with it. The dagger seemed to squirm in his grasp. He clenched his fist tight, cocked his arm, took a deep breath—

And stopped.

He couldn't throw it away. He was still an ore.

His shoulders sagged, and he sat heavily on the ground, head drooping in defeat.

Until he figured out how to change himself back into a human, he had to keep the blade. So long as he was an ore, any human he met would kill him on sight. The two races had been warring for three millennia already, and they wouldn't stop just for him. He had no magic left to teleport to his laboratory, and even if he did, the other mages would roast him alive. He'd be overwhelmed. And he certainly wasn't going to stoop so low as to try to move in with an ore tribe. He had to keep the dagger until he discovered how to make it work for him, instead of just working on him.

But that would have to wait for later. He was tired, injured, and the sun was too bright. So thinking, he lay back, flung his left arm over his eyes, and fell asleep, his right hand clutching the dagger to his chest.

He had no idea how long he'd been asleep, nor why he felt the sudden need to roll, hard, but he did so, only to see the tip of a spear imbed itself firmly in the dirt a scant few inches in front of his eyes.

He heard someone yell, "You jackass! You woke it up!" and a grunt as the spear was pulled out of the ground into the too-bright sky.

Hunters, militia, a stray farmer, Serreg didn't know. He didn't even have a clear idea where in Netheril he was.

But he knew his life was in mortal danger. His ore glands fired amazing amounts of adrenaline into his system, giving his senses such sensitive clarity that his ears rang in pain. The battle frenzy was a new sensation to the normally intellectual archwizard, one he was neither mentally nor emotionally, prepared for. Forgetting his magical training, he leaped to his feet bellowing a mighty battle cry. He saw a silhouette nearby, dark against the painful blue sky, with a spear held defensively. Serreg charged. Ore instinct, or perhaps an ingrained warrior's training granted by the dagger, urged Serreg to roll under the spear. He dived, tumbled forward, and his feet came back in under him. Serreg lunged upward again, the full weight of his body and force of his legs burying the dagger deep into the hapless human's abdomen. Serreg heard him grunt in pain—

And the archwizard was in an entirely different world.

A great shapeless mass moved slowly toward him, so Serreg slid gracefully aside to let it pass. His mind expanded freely, seeing everything all around, as if his entire being was a single pupil designed to take in the whole world.

This is interesting, thought Serreg, hanging effortlessly in space a great distance above the surface of the world.

A baritone thunder rolled through the air, but Serreg saw that the sky was a cloudless blue, so he flew closer to the sources to investigate.

He was tiny.

Four towering hunters stood with spears, moving slowly as

though through water. One was falling, doubled over, and Serreg saw drops of blood dripping from his belly, gracefully descending to the ground. On a whim, Serreg zipped under the dying hunter, weaving his narrow body between the crimson orbs as they fell.

Serreg flew up and hovered high above the hunters as he analyzed the situation. He found that he could inspect his body without turning his head, which was good, since it appeared he could hardly turn his head at all. A rapier-thin emerald thorax extended out behind him, and six legs dangled beneath. His four wings made a steady swoosh-swoosh sound as he absentmindedly flapped them. The perspective was a

hard one, actually being an insect instead of studying one impaled upon a silver pin, but it did appear that he was a dragonfly.

And the dagger? Where was it?

He scanned his feet, but saw nothing. But then, right in front of his eyes, he saw a glint of steel. One of his mandibles, of course. He still had his weapon.

He checked the hunters again. One tended to his fallen comrade. The others looked around nervously, wondering to where the ore had vanished. Serreg would have smirked, had he been able to with his chitinous jaws. Instead, he turned back toward the west, keeping a careful watch for any predatory swallows or tree frogs.

As a dragonfly, Serreg didn't feel like he was going particularly fast, but he dismissed that to the apparent dilation of time and the very real dilation of the world. He knew he was out flying the best speed he could have made as a human. But what bothered him as he continued on his way, was how he would eat.

He started to feel a gnawing hunger. Had it been minutes or hours that he'd been a dragonfly? Serreg had no way of knowing. The hunger felt different as an insect than it did as a human, a simpler sensation, but hunger just the same.

And he had no idea what dragonflies ate.

Insects to him were pests to be swatted, or specimens to be inspected in a gallery, or a jar full of parts in an apothecary's lab. Beyond that, he'd never bothered with them. So what did insects eat? He thought about it, then decided he'd have to test potential foods. He knew different insects ate the pollen from flowers, others ate the plants themselves, and some even ate other insects. He also knew some ate dead animals or other, more repugnant substances, but he willfully neglected to pursue those lines for the moment.

He touched down on a stalk of wild grass waving in the breeze. It didn't look appetizing, but he tried to bite it anyway.

Nothing.

He flew farther until he found a wildflower, glowing brightly to his dragonfly eyes, but again, it didn't look appealing, he had no idea how exactly to bite it, and when he did manage something, it just wasn't right.

So he turned toward attacking insects. He lunged at a grasshopper, but it was far too large to handle. A gnat was too small to catch, and a fly too fast. Finally, he managed to catch a small fluttering insect—he didn't even know what it was called—and crushed it in his jaws. The meal filled his mouth—

For a split second. He found himself sitting on his haunches, surveying the landscape from a sizeable elevation. He drew his lips into a self-satisfied sneer, smearing a small insect across one jagged fang. He swiveled his head to look at the world from this new perspective, but his eyes did not really see anything. His attention turned inward, feeling the raw power that coursed through his veins. He stretched out his great leathery wings, and gave an experimental beat. He drew a deep breath into his cavernous lungs, and exhaled a stream of pungent acid.

Oh, yes. He was a dragon.

And he was hungry.

He sniffed the air, catching the musky scent of wild oxen on the breeze. His eagle-sharp eyes saw them half a mile away. They hadn't noticed his sudden transformation. No surprise, it's not every day that a dragonfly becomes a dragon. He folded his wings, and stalked them, catlike, through the grass. The herd startled at the noise of his approach. Serreg roared and took wing, moving like a thunderclap, low, heavy, and powerful. He circled the herd once, then struck the largest of the

beasts with his lethal breath, liquefying its head as it ran.

He landed with a flurry of wings and a heavy thud as the herd stampeded away, screaming in animal panic. Serreg walked up to his kill and raised one paw to rend the meat when a glint of steel caught his eye. The foreclaw on his right front leg shone in the sun, carved with elegant glyphs. The dagger.

His superior dragon intellect immediately understood: every time he stabbed something, the dagger changed him.

Carefully Serreg set that black-scaled foot back down, and worked on the carcass with his other leg and his formidable teeth. He'd had no idea how much he would enjoy cracking bones between his jaws. Maybe it was part of being a dragon, or maybe he'd finally tapped into a heretofore unreachable part of his soul. Whichever the case, Serreg liked it.

The ox devoured, Serreg sat for a moment and contemplated the sky. Just as the dawn had driven away the darkness, so too had the day replaced the horrors of the past night with a bright new future. Life was looking good. Let those vile creatures sap the strength of the enclaves. Serreg didn't need them anymore.

Still, archwizards were not people to be trifled with, and they did not take kindly to dragons, no matter what their lineage. Serreg took one last look toward the skies where he'd grown up, then faced west again.

Serreg eventually found a luxurious swamp in which to lair.

He exulted in feeling the mud between his talons. It was far better than the remote and isolated life on Delia's rock.

But what to do with the dagger? He didn't want it on his forepaw anymore. He didn't even really want it around. It reminded him of his pathetic past, and the last gasp of his cowardice. In the end, he did as dragons do: he used it to start his hoard.

Carefully placing his right foreclaw in his mouth, he closed his teeth upon it. He clenched it tight, then flexed his paw and neck, prying the claw out of his toe. Fiery pain raced beneath his magical fingernail, his limb quivered with nerves begging for peace, but he persisted. The dagger tried to hold to his tender flesh, but then he heard a ripping sound as he disembedded it. With one final pull, one last flash of pain, it was free.

And so was he.

Serreg turned his head to the corner of the grotto that he had chosen for his stash, and let the dagger drop from his teeth. It struck the muddy floor with a ring, a keening metallic sound of frustration, and bounced far higher than physically justifiable. It bounced again, and again, and again. Eventually it landed, rocking from side to side, and the vibrations rotated the blade around until it pointed accusingly at Serreg.

With the back of his left paw, Serreg nudged the blade aside, but the push carried the blade around until it pointed at him again.

Complain if you want to, thought Serreg, I have no further need of you.

Limping slightly on his right forepaw, he moved to the entrance to his grotto.

I've studied long enough, he thought. Time to put that knowledge to use.

So thinking, he soared into the sky.

GORLIST'S DRAGON,
Elaine Cunningham

The Year of the Trumpet (1301 DR)

Ten-year-old Gorlist stared with open-mouthed dismay at the gift that commemorated the end of his word-weaning years. His reward for surviving a decade in the squalid outer caverns of Ched Nasad, for endless hours struggling with the intricacies of the dark elven speech, hand cant, and written language, was a book. A book!

His tutor, T'sarlt, watched expectantly. Gorlist snatched up his gift and hurled it across the room.

Folding his thin arms, he leveled a mutinous glare at the old drow and said, "Soldiers don't have the time to read."

"The time, or the wit?" T'sarlt snapped. "Raise your aspirations, boy! Some drow are bred for battle fodder, but you—you are a wizard's son."

According to the laws and customs of the drow, Gorlist was no such thing. The wizard Nisstyre had - sired him and sent T'sarlt to teach and care for him, but Gorlist was Chindra's son—Chindra, the gladiator who'd won free of the arena and worked her way up the ranks of the city's elite guard.

Chindra's son, Gorlist concluded sullenly, should have had a dagger as his word-weaning gift.

T'sarlt retrieved the book from the rough stone floor and placed it open on the table. He tapped the faintly glowing markings with a spidery black forefinger.

"You are entering your second decade of life. It is time for you to learn simple spells."

The boy glanced at the book and quickly snatched his gaze away. The magical markings seemed to writhe and crawl on the page, like maggots feasting upon a rotting glowfish. He repressed a shudder and twisted his lips in an imitation of the sneer Chindra wore whenever talk turned to such matters.

"Magic," he scoffed, "is for weaklings. Give me a sword, not bat dung and bad poetry."

T'sarlt pushed the book closer and said, "There is power here, and Nisstyre wishes you to wield it."

"So? All of Nisstyre's wishes won't keep Chindra from putting this book in the privy and making good use of its pages."

"If that's your measure of this book's worth," he said in a voice tense with controlled rage, "you are as stupid as you are arrogant."

Gorlist shrugged aside the insult and said, "Any education worth having comes from blood spilled, not books read. You can tell that to my mother's cast-off parzdiametkis."

The vulgar term, most commonly employed in a brothel, found the limits of T'sarlt's patience. The old drow lunged for the boy, his long, skinny fingers curved like a raptor's talons.

Gorlist easily danced aside. He lifted one hand in a rude gesture as he darted out of the cave they shared with Chindra. He scampered down the narrow stone alley, leaping over piles of street offal and dodging his tutor's grasping hands.

T'sarlt soon gave up the chase and clung, wheezing, to one of the twin stalagmites framing the entrance to Dragonsdoom Tavern, the brothel that provided Gorlist with his colorful vocabulary, as well as the occasional coin.

"Gorlist, come back at once!" T'sarlt called. "You'll be whipped for this!"

No doubt he would be, but not badly. Since Gorlist could write a little, he could send word to his father. T'sarlt was too old to take on another drow youngling. If Nisstyre dismissed him, where would he go?

Perhaps Chindra would keep him on. A sly grin twitched Gorlist's lips at the thought of his tutor spit-polishing Chindra's boots. Chindra had never shown much interest in T'sarlt, or in Gorlist, for that matter, but Gorlist took pride in his mother's steadfast refusal to relinquish him to Nisstyre.

"Males claiming children? Can't be done," she'd proclaimed. "Sets a bad precedent."

The memory of his mother's clipped, military tone brought a smile to the boy's face. What need had he of books? Chindra

couldn't read or write, but she had her own mark, and those who mattered knew and feared it.

Gorlist reached inside his tunic and ran his fingers over the crude pendant hidden there—a small, flat stone, onto which he'd scratched Chindra's mark. To him, it was as fine as any matron's gems.

He squeezed through the crowd lined up outside Zimyar's Exotic Mushrooms. Beyond the market cavern

lay a maze of tunnels, lairs for Underdark beasts and would-be ambushers. Gorlist started running as soon as he broke free of the crowd, his mind fixed upon glories ahead.

He made his way to the guard's training cavern without incident. Skirting the main entrance, he climbed the rough-hewn rocks to a small, secret cave high above the battleground. There he'd spent many stolen hours, watching the females train.

Two soldiers were on the field, moving together in a tight circle. His eyes went immediately to the taller female, a well-muscled drow whose shaved head was shiny with sweat and oil. That could be none but Chindra. Other females valued the beauty of flowing white hair, but Chindra refused to give her opponents the benefit of a hand-hold.

A happy sigh escaped Gorlist as he watched his mother. T'sarl't had often chided him for that dangerous affection.

"The heart is a subtle weapon," he'd cautioned. "It will be turned against you, if you're fool enough to hand it to another drow."

Gorlist cared nothing for his tutor's cautions. He loved everything about Chindra—her fierce grace in battle, the tune she whistled whenever she headed for the taverns, the welter of scars on her forearms. He'd asked her about them during one of her rare good moods, and was rewarded with the longest conversation they'd ever shared.

"Tangled as Lolth's web," she'd said proudly, turning her arms this way and that to display her battle scars. "Get in knife fights, and you're going to get cut. The skill is

managing how and where, and how deep. You'll learn the way of it, if you live long enough."

"Will you teach me?" he'd asked eagerly.

That had amused her.

"Are you so anxious to bleed, drowling? Watch to learn, learn to wait. The rest will come in time."

That very day he'd followed Chindra to the practice field for the first time. After all, where better to watch and learn?

Gorlist took his treasures from a cranny in the rock wall: a broken whetstone and a once-rusty sickle he'd found in a garbage heap. He settled down and began to smooth the stone over the slim, shining blade as he watched the battle below.

The fighters were testing new weapons—thick gloves tipped with curving metal talons. Gorlist watched, heart pounding, as the two females circled and slashed. The smaller female took a vicious swipe at Chindra. She leaned out of reach and countered with a quick, snatching movement that, captured her opponent's hand. She clenched, forcing her opponent's claws to bite into her own hand. Chindra's claws followed, disappearing into her opponent's flesh.

The smaller drow shrieked and slashed out with her free hand. Chindra repeated the capture, then threw their entangled hands out wide, yanking the female toward her. Her forehead slammed into the other drow's face. The female's nose flattened into a sodden mess, and her eyes rolled up until the whites gleamed.

Chindra held her grip while the fighter slumped senseless to the stone floor. Then she peeled off her gloves, one at a time, leaving the claws embedded in the warrior's fisted hands. She dropped the gloves and the female together, as casually as she might discard a soiled garment. It was a gesture of magnificent contempt, and the watching fighters stomped and roared their approval.

Their chant swept Gorlist to his feet. He stomped and hooted along with the warriors, shaking his crescent blade overhead

in imitation.

When the applause had died down and the fallen fighter hauled off to the healers, he regarded his small scythe and to his surprise and delight, saw that it was ready. The dull-bladed sickle meant for harvesting mushrooms boasted keen edges on its inner and outer curves. It was not the heart-seeking dagger of his dreams, but it was a start.

Perhaps, he thought with a grin, he would test its edge on the bindings of T'sarlt's wretched book.

Sickle in hand, Gorlist slid down the wall. He sauntered down the stone passage, practicing a soldierly swagger. He was nearly home when he heard a faint rustling in a side tunnel—not a foot passage, but a fetid, steep-sloping midden shoot.

Kobolds swarmed out of the midden hole like the rats they resembled. There were at least seven of the two-legged lizards, each nearly as tall as the drow child. Confident of an easy kill, they came on, yapping excitedly.

Gorlist planted his feet in unconscious imitation of his mother's battle stance. He ducked under the first kobold's grasping hands and drew his sickle across its soft-scaled belly. He danced back a step or two, then lunged back to slash the nearest kobold's snout. Before the startled creature could react, Gorlist reversed the blade's direction. The curved tip bit into the kobold's neck and hooked its wind pipe.

The creature fell, gurgling and pawing its ruined throat. Gorlist let out a savage whoop and threw himself at the next foe, slashing in joyous frenzy.

The kobold pack did what kobolds do when faced with unexpected resistance: they fled, squeaking curses. Gorlist stomped on a ratlike tail and cut the creature across the spine. It arched its back in a spasm of agony. The drow child seized one of the kobold's small horns, pulled the head back, and drew the sickle across

its throat. He threw the body aside and sprinted after the

others. Launching himself into a flying tackle, he brought down one of them—who, in its frantic scramble to escape, tripped one of its kin.

When both slaughters were completed, Gorlist staggered to his feet. He leaned against the stone wall, his breath coming in ragged gulps. For the first time in his life, he felt fully alive.

The wondrous battle frenzy ebbed all too soon. Gorlist took stock of the situation. His tunic and hands were sticky with kobold blood, and he ached in every joint and sinew. Remarkably, he was unmarked by any kobold tooth, claw, or weapon.

Gorlist all but danced back to Chindra's cave. His tutor glanced up sharply. Before he could comment, Chindra strode in. Her brief, dismissive glance sharpened into a soldier's assessing gaze.

"How much of that blood is yours?" she asked the child.

Gorlist's chin came up proudly and he answered, "None."

"Whose, then? No merchant's whelp, I'm hoping. Too short of coin to pay the blood price." "It's kobold blood."

Her crimson eyes widened. "Dead kobolds in the tunnels. Yours?" In response, he brandished his still-bloody sickle. A grin split Chindra's face.

"A fine harvest!" she crowed. "Five kobolds! How did you learn to fight?" "By watching you."

Because that seemed to please her, he gave her the salute he had seen so many times, that of one soldier to another.

Her hand flashed toward him like a striking snake and caught his wrist.

"Not that," she said firmly. "Never that. No male may give or get honor among the guard." Her eyes grew reflective. "But there are other ways..." Her gaze focused, snapped to his face. "You would be a fighter?"

He managed a fervent nod.

"Then you will learn as I did. Come."

She strode through the market, Gorlist following like a small

shadow. Excitement filled him, moving him beyond a child's enthusiasm for adventure—he had long desired to see the gaming arena—and into the wonder of unforeseen possibilities. Chindra was a soldier, so of course that was Gorlist's goal. But she had first been a renowned gladiator. He would match her fame, and follow her path from its beginning.

Gorlist padded silently after her down a series of side tunnels, narrower than those leading to the practice arena. He did not have to be told why: The better to defend the city should any of the arena's beasts escape— or for that matter, if by some marvel the arena fighters decided to band together in common purpose.

The stone corridor opened, and the arena lay before them. It was a huge chamber, ringed with tiers of seats. Slim walkways crossed overhead. Gorlist gave the structures scant attention. His eyes were fixed on the arena floor. Wondrous beasts, creatures never seen in the tunnels around Ched Nasad, fought and died there.

So, apparently, did drow gladiators. Several fighters sprawled on bloodied stone. Two others hacked at a hideous, gray-skinned creature with long limbs and astonishing powers of regeneration. A severed arm writhed on the arena floor, forgotten. The torn shoulder knitted. A bud of flesh appeared and blossomed into five gray petals. Those grew claws, which flexed and wriggled as a hand took shape at the end of the swift-growing new arm.

"I learned here," Gorlist's mother said, "and so will you."

Joy flared bright in the young drow's heart.

"I will win every fight," he promised.

She laughed and clapped him on the shoulder—a soldierly gesture Gorlist had never seen her offer a male. It was the proudest moment of his young life.

Chindra scanned the warriors who stood to one side, then raised her hand in a hail.

"Slithifar, Mistress of the Ring!"

A tall female looked up, frowning. Something about her gave Gorlist the impression of many snakes, melded by some mad wizard into a single dark elf. Her white hair was plaited into several braids, and she carried a bone-handled whip of leather thongs. Her face was as angular as a pit viper's, her gaze as flat and soulless.

But she lifted one hand in recognition and strode over to meet the newcomers. She and Gorlist's mother clasped forearms in a fighter's salute.

"What brings Chindra back to the games?" the ring mistress asked. "Come to show these younglings how fighting's done?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes," she responded, dropping her gaze to the child at her side.

Slithifar's white brows lifted. "And who is this bloody urchin?"

"Gorlist, Son of Chindra," the soldier said. "He is blooded indeed, and none of it his own."

The ring mistress ran a finger along Gorlist's stained tunic then touched it to her lips.

"Kobold?"

"Seven of them," Chindra lied proudly. "Hacked into fish bait with a mushroom sickle."

Slithifar slid a calculating gaze over the drow child, then turned back to his mother and said, "A worthy feat."

"Worth much," Chindra countered.

They went on in that vein for quite some time. Gorlist wandered over to the railing to watch the fighting. One drow still battled the gray monster, too intent to notice the severed limb slithering up behind him. Long knobby fingers seized the unwitting drow's ankle. The fighter let out a yelp of surprise and pain. Gorlist laughed with derisive delight.

A strong hand landed on his shoulder, lacquered nails biting into his flesh. He jumped, then grimaced. His response, and more importantly, his inattention, was too like the drow below to suit his pride.

"A troll," Slithifar said. "Good for training. It heals as fast as our younglings can slice it, and it eats those who lose."

Gorlist shifted his free shoulder in an impatient shrug. What was that to him?

His mother chuckled and said, "You see? He is not afraid."

Slithifar spun him to face her, and her red eyes licked over him like twin flames. "He will be," she promised.

Without looking up, she tossed a small bag to Chindra, who caught it deftly. She saluted the ring mistress and sauntered off. Gorlist started after her, but the butt of Slithifar's whip slammed into his gut, driving the air from his body.

"You are mine now," she said. "You go and do on my bidding. Do you understand?"

In truth, he did not. Then Chindra began to whistle her tavern tune. A trio of goblin slaves, scenting her good humor, held out importunate hands. She reached into the little bag, tossed the beggars a coin, and disappeared around the corner without a backward glance.

"She sold me," he said, his voice a raw whisper. "To you."

Tor more than you're worth... yet."

Gorlist noted her leer, and young though he was, he understood that, too. He returned her assessing gaze, letting her see his hatred and fury. Slithifar threw back her head and laughed with dark delight.

"Oh, you will earn your price and more! Come along, my little troll bait."

He followed, for he had no other choice. As he went, he tore the leather thong from around his neck and dropped the stone bearing Chindra's mark onto the rough path. Blinking strangely moist eyes, Gorlist forbade himself to mark where the stone fell.

His mother hadn't looked back, and neither would he.

The Year of Dreamwebs (1323 DR)

Years sped past. Gorlist grew as tall and well-muscled as Chindra had been. And he'd kept the promise made the day she'd sold him into slavery: he had won every fight.

His grim dedication was upon him as he sparred with Murdinark, his training partner and the closest thing to a friend he'd ever had.

As was their custom, they loosened their muscles in a bout with quarter staves. Gorlist met Murdinark's flamboyant, sweeping attacks with precise movements, and answered with deft counters that got through his friend's guard more often than not. Gorlist was the better fighter, but the crowds loved Murdinark. He suspected they came not to see Murdinark fight, but to watch him bleed. Gorlist took great pride in the fact that he himself was unmarked, flawless. Undefeated.

Even as the thought formed, Murdinark twisted his staff apart into two shorter sticks, each tipped with a metal hook. He raised both, caught Gorlist's descending staff in a cross parry, then whipped his arms out wide. The hooks sliced through Gorlist's staff like a knife through new cheese. The upper end clattered to the stone floor, and Murdinark kicked it aside.

"Hidden weapon. Well done," Gorlist admitted as he brought his shortened staff back into guard position.

"Your staff would have done that, too. You just had to know where to twist it."

"When did you intend to pass that information along?"

Murdinark flashed a cocky grin and said, "After I'd won, of course."

He tossed aside the divided staff and pulled a short sword from his belt. Gorlist followed suit. To his surprise, the taller drow hauled back his arm and launched the weapon into tumbling flight.

"Xipan-letharza!" he shouted.

An unseen hand tore the sword from Gorlist's grasp. It spun away, chasing after Murdinark's weapon. The two blades clashed together an instant before they hit the stone floor.

Intrigued, Gorlist strode over. The weapons lay together, as closely stacked as bodies in a commoners' crypt. He stooped

to reclaim his sword. Murdinark's clung to it as if the two swords had been welded together.

He turned over the enjoined weapons, noting the engraved pattern—a macabre design depicting skeletons entangled in posthumous orgy. The metal revealed by the etching held a faint bluish tinge.

"The magnetic ore found in the lower levels of Drum-, lochi Cavern?" he asked.

Murdinark grinned and replied, "Good guess, especially for someone who's never set foot out of Ched Nasad."

His words held a slight taunt. Arena fighters who won their bouts earned certain privileges: trips to the bazaar, visits to taverns and festhalls, even an occasional surface raid. Gorlist preferred to exercise the winner's right to decline any female's advances, so he let the jibe pass and resumed his inspection of the sword.

"Where did you get this?" asked Gorlist.

"From Slithifar. A morning gift," he said with a wink.

A wave of revulsion swept through Gorlist. "How can you endure that two-legged snake?"

The other drow shrugged and said, "It means rewards and pleasures."

Gorlist's gaze raked across his friend's forearm, which bore a stylized mark.

"Such as being branded like a he-rothe?" Gorlist said.

"You'll wear her mark, you know," Murdinark replied, all the humor fled from his face. "The first time you lose."

"I haven't lost yet," Gorlist reminded him, "and I don't plan to."

His friend glanced around to see if any might be listening, then he leaned in close and said, "Then you'd better get yourself down to the beast pens."

That advice seized Gorlist's attention. Slithifar had been practicing a rather tedious economy when it came to the purchase of new and exotic creatures for the arena.

"What is it this time?" he said, affecting a boredom he did

not feel. "A displacer beast? Another drider?"

"A dragon. From the surface."

For a long moment Gorlist stared at his friend. Murdinark confirmed that extraordinary news with a nod. Without a word, Gorlist strode toward the holding pens.

Finding the dragon was not too difficult. A creature from the World Above would require more light than Underdark dwellers. He followed the sputtering, smoking torches thrust into wall brackets to a deep, brightly-lit pit. When his eyes adjusted, an incredulous snort of laughter burst from him.

The dragon was a juvenile, no more than twenty feet long. Its scales were bright green and probably still soft enough to cut with a table knife. As Gorlist watched, a rat darted past. The dragon sucked air as if to fuel its breath weapon. Instead of poisonous gas, it loosed a hiss and some foul-smelling spittle.

Gorlist sneered. What did Slithifar expect the creature to do? Drown him in saliva?

He returned to his quarters to change his clothes in preparation for the midday meal—and to steal a few private moments to ponder Slithifar's latest test. To his surprise, Nisstyre awaited him there.

His wizard sire was slender and graceful, with long hair of an unusual coppery hue and features handsome enough to catch many a female's eye. His size and strength, however, would not carry him through a single bout in the arena. Despite all, Gorlist was not sorry that he resembled his mother.

"I have spoken to Slithifar," the wizard said without preamble. "She is not pleased with you."

"Slithifar's pleasure is the least of my concerns," Gorlist told him.

"Curb your arrogant tongue, boy! Without the mistress's favor, without magic, how can you expect to survive in this place?"

"Magic hasn't kept me alive these many years. This has."

Gorlist drew his mother's sword, won in combat and taken from her dead hand. "You'll have need of more subtle weapons," Nisstyre

said. "I have heard rumors of your coming bout. It is no small thing to battle a dragon." "A hatching," Gorlist sneered.

"Never dismiss a dragon. Even the young are cunning and resourceful."

"The only resources the beast can command are teeth and claws. It is too young to bring its breath weapon to bear."

"It would so appear," Nisstyre agreed. "But dragons are profoundly magical creatures. It is difficult to discern whether or not there's additional magic about them."

Gorlist began to understand.

"So Slithifar might have had the beast enchanted to appear younger than it is?"

"Entirely possible. You should expect to face the dragon's breath weapon. A red dragon's weapon is fire."

Gorlist's brow furrowed in puzzlement and he said, "But the dragon is green. I saw it."

"I do not doubt that you saw a green dragon," Nisstyre said, "but you will not fight one."

"Explain," Gorlist demanded.

"There are ways to steal secrets with magic. I took from Slithifar the knowledge of two dragons: one green, one red. The green dragon was a secret you were meant to learn. There is always a second deception, which would be the illusion of the dragon's youth, the absence of danger from its breath. Surely Slithifar expects you to see through these ploys. She would have you prepare to battle a dragon that breathes gas, while planning to send you against one that breathes fire."

Gorlist considered that. It made good sense, considering the source of the "secret." After all, Murdinark must have done something to earn those new weapons.

"You are certain?" he demanded.

"Where drow and dragons are concerned, little is certain."

Slithifar went to great trouble and expense to bring dragons from the surface lands. She is confident you will lose."

"How do you know?"

Nisstyre smiled coldly and said, "She made a wager with me. My prize, should you win, is your freedom from the arena."

"I will win."

"Of course you will, because you will cheat."

Before Gorlist could object, Nisstyre held up a small crystal object: a miniature dragon skull, marvelously rendered and filled with dust that sparkled and spun.

"This holds a powder that quenches dragonfire. Throw it into the dragon's mouth if it draws breath to fuel its fires."

The fighter regarded the object with distaste and said, "I dislike using magic."

"I can assure you that Slithifar has no such scruples. In fact, she has no scruples at all."

Nisstyre pushed up a voluminous sleeve, revealing a slender arm bearing Slithifar's personal mark. Revulsion shuddered through Gorlist, deepening when he noted the furrows in the wizard's flesh. A faint glow emanated from the old wound, speaking of powerful and no doubt painful magic.

"An ever-burning acid quill," Nisstyre said succinctly. "Punishment for my attempt to purchase your freedom shortly after your mother sold you. You can expect this and worse, if you lose this fight."

"I don't plan to lose."

"No one plans to lose," the wizard snapped. "But he who doesn't plan to win will lose all the same. If you lose this fight, she can make you her parzdiamo.

Believe me when I tell you this is not a fate to be envied."

"You are free with your favors, father," Gorlist sneered.

"Perhaps she had a son from you, as well?"

An icy film slid over Nisstyre's eyes, an expression Gorlist had seen on many an opponent's face when a well-aimed blow sundered a beating heart.

"A daughter," he said shortly. "You fought and killed her,

fairly early in your arena career."

Something almost like remorse gripped the young fighter.

"I didn't know."

"And now that you do, you see how little such knowledge is worth," Nisstyre said, his tone ringing with the finality of a subject closed. He handed Gorlist the crystal skull, then drew out a second vial.

"You wear Chindra's sword," he said, "and so you know that every champion eventually falls. If you do not defeat the dragon, drink this poison. It will not hurt you, but some hours after Slithifar claims her prize, she will die screaming, and none will know why."

Gorlist accepted both items and said, "With that image in mind, I almost regret my coming victory."

"Your pride will strengthen your arm," Nisstyre said, "but remember that every drow uses hidden weapons. The wise fighter employs his enemies' as well as his own."

The fighter regarded Nisstyre for a long moment, waiting for him to add detail to that cryptic advice. After several moments, the answer came to him. His lips curved in a small, secret smile. Perhaps there was something to be said for magic, after all.

"Chindra would never have fathomed so subtle a revenge," the wizard said.

The young fighter responded with a grim smile and said, "So? Who is this Chindra, and what is she to me?"

On the day of Gorlist's bout, he would have no one but Murdinark help him prepare. His friend carefully clipped Gorlist's hair close to his head, then helped him into his leather armor. Murdinark tested the edge of Gorlist's weapons and slid them into sheaths attached to the fighter's forearms, boots, and weapons belt. Throughout it all, he freely betrayed Slithifar's secrets.

"... trainers say the dragon fights primarily with its teeth. Its forepaws have but little reach. Avoid its bite, and you will fare well."

"... the wings have been trimmed to keep it from flying, so you have nothing to fear from the wing claws..."

"... should take this spell scroll for a bubble of pure air, in case the dragon can breathe a poison cloud..."

"Enough, Murdinark," Gorlist said at last.

He managed a smile and held out his hand for a comrade's grasp. Murdinark took the offered hand in both of his own. His smile froze, and his eyes widened.

"Damn me for a drider, I almost forgot!" He reached into his bag and pulled out a pair of gloves. He held one open for Gorlist and said, "Very fine leather, excellent grip. They belong to Slithifar." He grinned. "I thought it might please you to wear them until you can replace them with gloves of dragonhide."

Gorlist joined the drow in a dark chuckle and donned the gloves. With one hand on the hilt of Chindra's sword, he swaggered into the arena. A chorus of ululating cheers greeted him. A full house.

Smudge pots ringed the arena, and goblin slaves tended the coals. Gorlist noted Nisstyre in the stands before colored smoke began to rise from the pots, obscuring the audience from his view. Since Gorlist

could see no purpose to the smudge pots, their presence made him uneasy.

Then the gate opened, and the dragon trotted into the arena. It was, as Nisstyre had predicted, a red dragon, considerably larger than the young green.

Gorlist threw a fulminating glare back at the arena gate.

Murdinark shaped the hand signals for, I did not know. This I swear.

The fighter sneered and turned to meet his foe. He drew Chindra's sword—

Which promptly flew from his hand.

The sword struck a ringing blow against a blue metal shield hanging on the wall.

"Oh, well done, Murdinark," Gorlist said softly.

He did not anticipate that his "friend" might have a third sword of magnetic metal, one with a hilt resembling Chindra's sword.

He drew another sword from the scabbard on his back. He'd fastened his own baldric, and that weapon he trusted.

Then the light hit him, and his confident smirk turned into a rictus of pain.

Terrible light filled the arena, bright as the sun that interrupted the joyous carnage of surface raids and sent the dark elves fleeing back to their deep places. Suddenly Gorlist understood the purpose of the smudge pots. The crowd sat in comfortable shadows, watching the fight through a filtering haze of smoke rising from magical braziers while he was forced to fight in near-daylight conditions.

So be it.

It took all his strength and will to endure the punishing illumination. He would not fall to light, pain, or treachery. Tears poured in rivulets from his burning eyes, but he did not so much as squint. He let out a roar, one that reverberated through the cavern.

After a moment, Gorlist realized that another voice had joined his. The clamor of the crowd gave way to hushed anticipation. The roar of a dragon, even a soft-scaled youngling such as the one he faced, was sufficient to awe even that jaded crowd.

Gorlist fisted his watering eyes and struggled to focus. Blood-bright scales reflected light like vengeful moons as the dragon came on. It moved like a lizard, with an undulating crawl, but there was also something in its approach that reminded Gorlist of a displacer beast: the feline grace, the promise of a sudden pounce amplified by the wings held high and curved, ready for the downbeat that would launch it into flight. It hissed, catlike, revealing stiletto teeth.

But the dragon's first attack had nothing to do with teeth and talons. Its long red tail slashed toward Gorlist like a

priestess's whip. The drow nimbly leaped, but the dragon was quicker still. The blow caught him in the air and sent him flying. Gorlist rolled to deflect the force of impact and came swiftly to his feet.

He lofted his sword and ran in. The dragon lifted an armored foreleg to accept the blow, then traced a deft, circular movement, eerily similar to the move a swordsman would make to disarm an opponent-provided that opponent had too tentative a grip on his weapon.

To Gorlist's surprise, the tactic worked. His sword flew from his hand. As he ducked the next swipe of the dragon's paw, he quickly smeared one glove against his cheek. The leather had been oiled. Wearing such gloves, he could never hold a sword for long.

He danced back, stripping off the gloves, burning with the twin fires of betrayal and pride. The dragon had been trained to know Gorlist's imposed weakness.

It had disarmed him, a feat no drow had ever been able to accomplish.

The dragon advanced. Gorlist ripped a shield from the wall and thrust it up to meet the coming blow. The creature's forepaw shredded the tough hide. Gorlist shield-smashed the snout, and the dragon spat teeth.

Roaring in pain and anger, it reared up, rampant. Crimson breastplates shifted with the swelling intake of air as the creature prepared a killing blast. Confident in his father's magic, Gorlist hurled the tiny crystal skull into the dragon's open mouth.

The dragon let out a mighty belch. What came from its mouth was not the smoke of a quenched flame, but a cloud of foul-smelling gas.

Gorlist staggered back, gagging and choking. His burning, streaming eyes perceived the huge red bulk closing in on him. He went for his dagger and found that it had been peace-bound into its sheath.

Silently cursing that new treachery, Gorlist rolled aside and

came up holding a bloody tooth. He sliced the leather thongs with it and jerked the dagger out. He thrust up blindly as the huge weight descended, bearing him down into the darkness.

Gorlist awoke to a strange silence, interrupted only by the high-pitched whine in his ears. He shook his head to clear the noise, and instantly regretted it. Nausea swept through him. Strong hands helped him sit, steadied him while he was brutally sick.

When the sickness passed, Gorlist realized he was still in the arena. It had emptied of spectators. The dragon was dead, and the hilt of a long dagger protruded from between two chest scales. Gorlist's face burned, and he was covered in blood.

"Whose?" he demanded, indicating the red stain. A familiar face swam into focus, a narrow foxlike face surrounded by coppery hair. "Not yours, not the dragon's," said Nisstyre. "What, then?"

"If you can stand I will show you."

Gorlist nodded and allowed Nisstyre to help him to his feet. The first stiffness soon gave way, and he noted with relief that he seemed not badly hurt. With Nisstyre's support, he made his way over to the huge corpse.

"Look at the breast plates," the wizard directed.

Gorlist looked. The red scales were mottled, and beneath the bright hue was another color.

"This was actually a green dragon, painted to appear red in the bright light," Nisstyre said with obvious chagrin. "I did not believe Slithifar would take the deception to another level."

"So the powder that should have quenched a red dragon's fire-breath had no effect on the cloud of gas."

"A little, fortunately, or you would be dead. I suspect that you were also aided by the magical smoke. Its purpose was to hold the poison in the arena, protecting the crowd. Slithifar is clever," Nisstyre concluded ruefully. "The light

served three purposes: to put you at a disadvantage, to disguise the dragon's true nature, and to provide a misleading explanation for the poison filter."

Gorlist nodded, taking it all in.

"My face," he said, touching his burning cheek.

"The pain will fade," Nisstyre assured him, "but the mark will not. I took the liberty of giving you a magical tattoo, one that will glow with colored light—all but invisible to any eyes but a drow's—that corresponds to the color of any nearby dragon."

"A tattoo?" Gorlist repeated, finding the notion strangely appealing. Scars were unacceptable, but a magical tattoo that marked him as a dragon slayer? That he could wear with pride.

"Let it be a reminder to us both. Dragons are treacherous beasts, but it is possible to know their nature and predict their actions. This is not true of our most deadly enemy: our fellow drow. It is no longer safe for us in Ched Nasad."

Gorlist responded with a derisive snort.

His father waved the sarcasm away with a sharp, dismissive gesture and said, "I am without clan, which makes me anyone's meat. Once you leave the arena, you will leave behind the protection that successful gladiators enjoy. Do not think for a moment that Slithifar's wrath will not follow you."

"But what else is there? The wild Underdark?"

"The wide world," Nisstyre replied. "There are other males like us, other places we might go, other gods we might worship."

The blasphemy of that struck Gorlist like a fist, but the possibilities were intoxicating. He was still speechless when Murdinark approached, hands held out wide in a gesture of peace or surrender. As unobtrusively as possible, Gorlist gathered up a handful of dragon teeth and put the vial of poison among them. He clenched his hand, breaking the vial and coating the ivory daggers with the poison.

"Gorlist, I swear I knew none of it. It was Slithifar—"

Gorlist surged to his feet, slamming into Murdinark and driving them both several paces back. They struck the arena's stone wall. Gorlist shoved his forearm against the other drow's throat, all but cutting off his air. With his free hand he slammed a dragon tooth into Murdinark's upper arm.

"That's for the blue-metal sword."

He thrust a tooth through the fleshy part of Murdinark's nose.

"This for the tail swipe."

Another tooth went into the traitor's belly.

"And this for the peace-tied dagger."

Gorlist had several grievances and enough dragon teeth to lend emphasis to the recital. When only one was left, he lifted it to Murdinark's face, prepared to drive it into his eye. After a moment, he released the gasping warrior and threw the tooth aside.

"Every drow has hidden weapons," he said dully, "and you were Slithifar's. No warrior melts down a sword because it was used against him. Go to Slithifar, tell her I will return to the arena in a tenday. I will challenge and defeat her, as I did Chindra."

He sent a quick glance toward Nisstyre, and received an almost imperceptible nod of approval. Every drow had hidden weapons. Gorlist would use Slithifar's against her. He gave the poisoned drow a final, contemptuous shove and followed his father out of the arena, away from Ched Nasad.

And he never glanced back.

THE KEEPER OF SECRET

Ed Greenwood

The Year of the Weeping Moon (1339 DR)

It was the eve of the Revel of Storms, and as the gods usually seemed to want such an evening to be, it was a warm, breezy night in crowded and stinking Waterdeep, with the sort of eager rising wind that meant rain was coming.

Laughter and eager chatter carried far on the scudding airs,

and folk were out in plenty on the streets. Little of that restless wind, however, found its way past the smoke-blackened tapestries that shrouded the inner booths of Darth's Dolphyntyde, a tiny fish-and-quaff corner shop on south side Watchrun Alley, to stir the stinks of its deepest, darkest corners.

The fat bulk that most of Waterdeep knew rather unfavorably as Mirt the Moneylender sat in the rearmost booth, the awakened power of his ironguard ring tingling on one finger.

Blades in the ribs were a peril all too easily offered hereabouts not to spend the magic—and Darth himself was one who owed him coin, and would shed no tear if something befell Mirt in a dark corner of the Dolphyntyde.

The beads of the booth curtain rattled slightly, and Mirt's forefinger tightened on the trigger of the cocked and loaded handbow that lay ready in his lap, under the table.

"If you slay me now," a nasal voice came from the darkness beyond the curtain, "you'll see far less than what I owe. Far, far less."

"But I'll be rid of all the waiting in places like these for ye, Yelver," Mirt growled. "Ye're late—as usual."

"So arrive late yourself, and save the waiting," Yelver Toraunt hissed, sliding in through the curtains like a wary snake in an uneasy hurry. "I fear I've no welcome words for you this night, where're the gods smile."

"Ye can't pay off thy debt just now," Mirt said, his words a judgment rather than a question. "As usual."

Yelver Toraunt shrugged and said, "I can't find coin for so much as a raw eel to eat, just now. Rooms, clothes—all gone. Just Yelver, trying to scare up coins owed to him, so as to have something to hand to you. Times are hard."

The fat moneylender scowled, "So they say, loud and often, yet 'tis strange that not every last one o' my sometime business associates fail to hand me some o' the glint, when 'tis due. Thy tardiness'll cost ye an extra four dragons—and

none o' thy shaved gold, neither!"

"Fair enough, I s'pose," Yelver replied with a shrug. "Blood-written?"

Mirt lifted his visible hand aside to reveal a waiting parchment, and thrust it forward with two fat and hairy fingers. Unhooding his lamp just one notch, he illuminated a small arc of table that included the page and a needle-knife too short to be much of a weapon.

Yelver took up the knife, the moneylender's eyes never leaving him, and slowly and carefully pricked the tip of one forefinger and wrote out the added debt, adding his mark. Then he set the blade down with the same exaggerated care and stepped well back.

"And so?"

"And so," said Mirt, "a tenday hence, at dusk, we'll meet at the Yawning Portal, where ye'll render something in the way of payment—or I'll start seizing the trade goods ye forgot to mention, from the loft on Slut Street, Moro's cellar off Fish Street, and thy oh-so-secret hidehdlds in Sea Ward."

Yelver swallowed at the moneylender's grim ghost of a smile and muttered, "Aye. I'll do that. Some coins, at least."

"And if ye don't? And if, say, the city holds no hair of ye by sunset tomorrow?"

"Then it'll profit you little to go looking for my bones," Yelver replied. "Seek for whatever I've left with the Keeper of Secrets."

And he whirled away and was gone in a rattle of beads ere Mirt could ask more.

The Revel of Storms had been marked by a trio of furious, fast-racing cloudbursts that had snarled across the city near highsun, leaving behind a hot, damp evening trimmed around its edges with ominous rolls of distant thunder.

Mirt the Moneylender growled in tune with them as he tramped in out of the darkness, the well-oiled back door of the Yawning Portal swinging wildly in his wake. He ignored a disapproving look from one of

the sweat-cloaked cooking lasses and lurched past her with nary a leer—leaving her looking warily at his back and wondering what calamity he was bringing word of.

In truth, Mirt's dark temper was due to nothing more than a bad day of trade. Two debtors had paid off early, another two had vanished without trace, and four more were showing him empty hands and claiming poverty, while having no skills that Mirt could hire out to recoup his coins.

A season or so back, in the Company of the Wolf, swift sword thrusts would have handed such grinning-up-their-sleeves wastrels fitting rewards ... but just as he was no longer Mirt the Merciless, helm-lord of hireswords who'd been better disciplined blades than the grandest royal guards he'd seen anywhere, Mirt no longer handed out fitting rewards that carried high prices. His own neck, for instance.

No, 'twas time for a drink and a quiet demolition of Durnan across a lance-and-lion board, whilst muttering forth heartfelt venom on all wastrels, idiots, and unsympathetic gods.

There it waited under the lamplight at one end of the smooth-polished bar, all the pieces set out on the lancers and lions board, with Durnan's own battered tankard standing behind it, but—Mirt blinked—his old friend was across the room, grimly wrestling a slumped, gore-drooling body up out of a chair. Blood dripped from dangling fingertips as the lifeless man was swung up and under one of Durnan's stone-thewed arms. A lolling head faced Mirt for a moment: Yelver's.

"Spew of Sune!" Mirt snarled. "Dur, how-?"

"Throat dart," Durnan said. "Handbow, with his slayer sitting across from him. Young elf lass, by the one glimpse of an ear I had out the cowl of her cloak

as she whirled away." He waved his free hand down the room. "Tharl tried to bar her way—but she murmured magic and the cloak swallowed her and itself before he could lay hand or blade to her."

By then the innkeeper had reached his destination, and his hand fell to the ring of an all-too-familiar trapdoor, awakening the glow of the spell that let only him open it.

Mirt lurched forward sputtering, "Hey-hoy! Nay so swift! I can have his memories spell-read."

The innkeeper shook his head, and thrust a pointing thumb at something glistening that was starting to slide out of Yelver's left nostril, its black and slimy end questing obscenely into the air like a corkscrew seeking a bottle.

"See?" said the innkeeper. "Some jack who did darker business than yours with goodman Toraunt made him swallow a brainworm."

Black and glistening, the worm slid a little way out of Yelver's nose, swollen from its meal of man-brain.

"Seventeen dragons" Mirt snarled disgustedly, glaring at it.

"Gone for good." He turned away to slam one hairy fist down on a handy table—and remembered something, and turned back to where Durnan was calmly feeding the corpse down a chute into the unseen depths below.

"Have ye ever heard of the Keeper of Secrets?" asked Mirt.

As Durnan peered at his friend, lifting a surprised eyebrow, Yelver Toraunt's dead limbs thumped and thudded on stone walls a long way down. Something that slobbered was waiting for their arrival. After the final, meaty landing, made a swift but noisy disposal of Durnan's offering.

Someone sitting at a table nearby winced at the gnawing sounds, and turned away.

"Gods below," a sailor muttered, "but I need more bellyfire after hearing that! Keeper!"

"The master's name is Durnan," the man seated across from him growled. "And orders aren't bawled here. Twice."

The sailor's reply was a sneer, but Durnan was already striding across the floor, every inch a prowling warrior. The flicker of the candle wheels overhead gleamed on the broad metal bracers he wore on his forearms, and on the hilts of the three ready daggers sheathed in each of them.

"What'll you have, thirsty guest?" he asked calmly. "Another tall tankard of Black Sail? Or something warmer?"

"Uh, er, I'll stick to Sail," the sailor said, a little sullenly.

"A sturdy quaff, to be sure," Durnan agreed, standing back with a smile.

The serving lass who stepped in front of him to place a glistening-with-condensation tankard and a half-moon of seed-spiced cheese in front of the man wore only a smile, a magnificent mane of startlingly blue hair, baggy breeches, and a bewildering tangle of dark tattoos that confused every gazing eye.

The sailor blinked away from her beauty and mumbled, "I've no coin for yon cheese. Take it aw—"

"Nay, nay," the tattooed woman said in a husky, smoky, surprisingly deep voice, patting his arm like a hungry whore. " 'Tis free—of my making, and Durnan's compliments. We like to treat friends well here, lord of the waves."

The sailor shot her a swift, hard stare, seeking some sign of mockery, but found none. With a rather sheepish grunt, he raised the cheese in thanks, found himself looking into Durnan's half smile, and sought refuge in the tankard.

When he set down both his drink and a remnant of cheese to draw breath a swallow or three later, he looked almost surprised to still be unpoisoned, or free of bitter-salt or other trickery.

By then Durnan was setting an even larger tankard in front of Mirt, moving his first lancer forward to a fortress square, and saying, "I've been hearing about the Keeper of Secrets, Mur. A woman who deals with the desperate, they say. Her shop's in North Ward."

"North Ward? A fence? A pawn-hand? And why've I never heard of her?"

Durnan shrugged and said, "I guess you've not yet been desperate."

Mirt snorted. "Not a rat gnaws nor a chamber pot breaks in this city that I don't hear about—excepting guild inner circle

whisper-moots and what goes on behind the walls of the nobles' towers. Ye know that, Dur."

The innkeeper shrugged, his eyes ranging around his taproom.

"She's not been in business long, I'd guess," he said.

Mirt moved a lion, and Durnan's fingers flipped up the trapdoor on the next square to reveal the grinning skull that meant he was bringing his lich into play—and dooming Mirt's piece—without the master of the Yawning Portal ever looking down at the board.

"She does her trade in dark rooms atop an empty all-mending shop on north side Sammarin's Street," he added quietly. "Rooms of locked iron bar gates that're never lit, so no eye ever sees her. Neighbors hear her singing at all hours—haunting airs and unfamiliar tongues, but a beautiful voice."

"Happy dancing hobgoblins," Mirt said, not believing a bit of it. He moved a lancer away from the revealed peril of Durnan's lich. "I can't believe I've never heard a breath of this..."

"Deafness comes to us all, in the end," Durnan murmured, moving his lich forward to capture a lion—and doom Mirt's throne-princess in the process.

The moneylender stared at his imminent defeat and sighed heavily.

"I yield me. Another game?"

The innkeeper smiled and took down his cloak, signaling to Luranla to take the bar. The tattooed lass gave him a smiling wave and wink, and turned to survey the room as Durnan had been doing.

Mirt stared up at his friend and asked, "Do I play that badly?"

"This night, yes. Yet we're friends, so I've agreed."

The moneylender blinked.

"To seek out your other game," Durnan replied, taking down a baldric heavy with warblades from a peg on the wall,

slinging it over his shoulder, and reaching for its cross-buckles. "And visit this Keeper of Secrets."

—<!£TO—'

"Your business, gentlesirs?"

The ever-so-slightly hollow voice seemed to come from their left. Down a speaking-tube.

Durnan looked at Mirt, and made the "your speech" gesture they'd both known he'd make. Words had never been his chosen weapons.

Still wheezing from their trip up the dark stairs, Mirt said, "Secrets. Yelver Toraunt told us to seek here."

"What sort of secrets are you interested in leaving with me? Did Yelver say anything of my rates?"

"Nay, he did not—and being upstanding merchants of Waterdeep, lady, we have no secrets," Mirt joked, assuming an air of exaggerated innocence.

Her answer was the snort he'd expected.

"Lady," he added, "we came here, at his bidding, to learn what secrets Yelver had left with you."

"And where is Yelver, to give me his permission to reveal anything to you?"

"Dead," Mirt replied. "Eaten."

"You can prove this, of course?"

Mirt looked at Durnan—who'd acquired a faint smile—and lifted his hand.

"Lady," the innkeeper replied, "I'm the keeper of the Yawning Portal, Durnan by name. Yelver was most definitely dead—murdered—when I put him down the shaft to where the beasts below lurk."

"Interesting," the voice observed.

Mirt waited, but the unseen woman said nothing more. He sighed, and waved at Durnan to unhood the lantern completely.

"Lady," he said, "Yelver was a business partner of mine—"

"So much I know, Mirt the Moneylender, and more— every detail of your dealings together, in fact. Know you

something now: I keep secrets, not betray them. Even the secrets of the dead. Especially the secrets of the dead."

The lamplight showed the two men a vertical row of identical small, round holes—one of which must have been the speaking-tube in use—in a stone block wall before them. Stout—and chained and locked—iron bar gates blocked the way to closed stone doors to their left and right. The landing they stood on led nowhere else except back down the steep stair they'd ascended, to the street door below.

"Keeper of Secrets," Durnan asked, "let us understand each other. Is there any way we can learn what Yelver told us to seek here? The payment of a fee, perhaps?"

"No, goodman Durnan. I have no need of bribes, and if, as you say, Yelver Toraunt is dead, I can henceforth never trust anyone claiming to be him, or with a letter purporting to be from him. Unless, of course, you two are lying to me now—which makes you both untrustworthy in my eyes, and so not to be given Yelver's secrets in any circumstances."

"So there's no way we can ever learn Yelver's secret?" Mirt growled.

"None," the voice from the wall said lightly. "A good evening to you, good sirs."

"It seems we've slipped from 'gentle' to merely 'good,'" Durnan observed aloud, waving Mirt toward the stairs.

"Evidently the price one pays for being made wiser," Mirt agreed. "Farewell, Keeper of Secrets."

"Farewell," the calm voice replied.

The two men traded glances, shrugs, and smiles.

Mirt set his boot onto the topmost step and asked suddenly, "Why the darkness? And all these bars?"

"I like darkness," was the reply, as calm as ever.

Durnan waved at Mirt to get moving, and rehooded the lantern. They went down the stairs quietly.

"Mayhap Yelver just wanted to have one last, lame laugh at me," Mirt mused aloud, as they crossed a fish guts-littered alley where rats scurried fearlessly this way and that, and

made for Adder Lane. "Why'd ye bring us this far south, hey? The Portal's a good—"

"To see if all the men strolling along back there were following us, of course," Durnan muttered.

Mirt stiffened, but managed to avoid turning around.

"And-?" he asked.

"They are * Durnan replied. "A dozen, and one may be a mage." "Watchful Order?"

"Far less official, Fd say. Let's duck into Roldro's cellar."

The innkeeper strode ahead, rapped on a particular panel set into a crumbling wall, and sang a brief, wordless phrase of music. A much smaller panel nearby slid open, and someone uttered a non-committal grunt from beyond it.

"Flashscales," Durnan murmured in reply—and the response was the click of a bolt being slid back.

The door, a few paces along the wall, looked more like a series of boards nailed over a disused hatch than a usable entryway. But the innkeeper snatched it open as he reached it, and was gone through it like a diving sea hawk. Mirt huffed and plunged after, banging the door closed not far ahead of a sudden shout and clatter of hobnailed boots on cobbles.

"Cellar to cellar, and so away," Durnan told his friend several rooms and startled young Roldro children later, as they went down damp steps into a room that stank of rotting tide wrack and mildew. "To rouse the Portal."

Mirt nodded a little wearily and said, "Aye, where they know where to find us."

Something wriggled inside his head, and he stumbled up against the wall of Murktar Roldro's cellar with a groan.

"Magic?" Durnan snapped, putting a steadying hand on Mirt's shoulder.

The moneylender nodded and waved a vague hand struck dumb by a flood of memories—faces, places, names, and amounts owed and due dates and—and—

The invasion was gone, as swiftly as it had come.

"Someone ... in my mind," he wheezed, clutching at Durnan's stone-steady arm. "That mage following us." The innkeeper nodded and asked, "Seeking memories of Yelver?"

"Aye. Turned up everything—gods, my head's a-whirl still—but Yelver, yes, an' our talk with the Keeper. I wonder what Yelver was mixed up in?"

Durnan was already whirling past him.

"Stay here," he said. "Be right back."

Mirt leaned against the wall, groggy, listening to his friend's boots racing up the stairs—and more slowly coming back down again. The keeper of the Yawning Portal wore another of his grim smiles.

"They're all racing away back nor'east, of course."

"To the Keeper of Secrets," Mirt grunted. "Knowing she told us nothing, we're now nothing—but she remains a danger." He slapped his hand to his sword hilt, drew in a deep breath, and started up the stairs himself. "So, 'tis back to Sammarin's Street."

"Way ahead of you," Durnan replied cheerfully, bounding past.

"Aye," Mirt agreed. "Everyone always is."

The flash and the trembling of cobblestones under their feet came when they were still a street away from the Keeper's shop.

Faint sounds of startled cries, curses, and the crashes of things falling and breaking arose in the tallhouses and shops all around. Durnan broke out of the trot that let Mirt keep pace with him, and raced ahead.

Almost immediately he returned with the terse explanation: "Two Watch patrols."

"Rooftops," Mirt replied, waving at a distant tall-house with carved dolphin downspouts.

Durnan flashed him a smile and dropped it off his face as he looked back behind them.

"More Watch coming," said the innkeeper.

Mirt shrugged and replied, "So we're innocents, look ye. Deafinnocents."

"No sort of innocent climbs downspouts in the middle of the night."

"Innocent downspout inspectors do," Mirt growled. When Durnan rolled his eyes, the moneylender protested, "I've a palace badge, and know what names to invoke. I—"

The uppermost floor of the building they'd visited not long before burst apart with a roar, in an eruption of stones, roof slates, and the shattered bodies of men.

A head and what looked like a knee bounced and pattered wetly to the cobblestones nearby. Durnan abandoned any attempt to look innocent and clawed at Mirt.

"Down" he hissed, "and look dazed."

Blinking around at the tumult of running Watch officers and still-rolling shards of stone, Mirt complied.

They crouched together against the wall of what looked to be a toy shop as shouting uniformed men ran past, lanterns bobbing.

"Yelver surprises me more and more," the fat moneylender muttered, "but we'll never know his secrets now. No one could've—"

There was a creaking close at hand as a "downsteps door" opened. Durnan peered down a narrow flight of stone steps past the usual clutter of rain barrels and discarded trash, into one of the many cellar-level entries common to that part of North Ward. After the blasts, someone could come out curious, or wanting to flee, or waving a blade and wild enough with fear to use it on anyone.

Mirt hastily drew back his boots to let the lone cloaked and cowled figure mount the steps, noting bare, empty hands clutching at her—yes, her—cloak to keep her features covered.

She stopped, peering up at the two men, and said, "Stand back, if you please, and let me pass."

It was the calm voice they'd traded words with in the darkness.

"Of course," Mirt squeaked, trying to make his voice sound unlike his own.

He and Durnan both stepped back, lifting empty hands to signal that they meant no harm. But as the woman reached the top of the steps, Durnan whirled back to face her, luring her attention. Mirt plucked back her cowl.

Her revealed face was smiling wryly. Beneath the emerald-green cloak was a rather plain, heavy-set woman in a rumpled gown. She had very large, dark, arresting eyes. Around their dark-fire gaze one scarcely noticed plump cheeks, pale skin, and unruly brown hair.

"Well met, lady," Durnan said. "What price are your secrets now?"

"Bensvelk Miirik Darastrix loex?"

The hiss was swift and angry.

"The Keeper?" a deeper, calmer voice rumbled. "Nay, nay, she lives. Were she to die, yon crystal would burst." A hand waved at a glowing orb of glass halfway across the cavern.

"And you really should keep to Common, Orauth. Even in Waterdeep, Draconic attracts attention."

"Malval om aurm!"

"Of course your anger is great. So is mine. To lose her would be an aurm blow, yes, but the true korth is if humans learn what she does—and through her, of us. Which is why I watch the crystal. Anyone who captures, attacks, or hurls magic at her must die."

"Lay a hand on me," the woman said, "and I'll scream for the Watch."

As she spoke, more Watch officers trotted past, several Watchful Order mages striding among them.

"Ye mistake our natures, lady," Mirt protested.

"No, she doesn't," Durnan disagreed, before the Keeper could reply.

Whatever word she started to snap dissolved into a swift, short laugh.

She tugged her cowl free of Mirt's fingers, faced them both squarely, and asked, "What do you want?"

Mirt blinked at her then said, "Uh—er—to know thy name, an' who those men were, an' what ye did to them an' how, an'... an'..."

"Yelver's secrets," she finished calmly, shaking her head.

"Nicely listed, lady," Durnan agreed politely, and fell into waiting silence.

As it stretched, the three of them stood regarding each other, and the street around them filled with gawking Waterdhavians.

"Very well," the woman said at last. "You may call me Taunamorla."

"And?" Durnan asked politely.

"I am still," Taunamorla said with a smile, "the Keeper of Secrets."

"Your real name being one of them?"

Taunamorla's smile widened.

"Of course," she replied. "Now, neither of you are dullards—and so I believe you can guess how dangerous questioning me further will be."

Durnan touched Mirt's arm, and the stout moneylender nodded curtly. He'd already caught sight of a tall, cloaked man striding toward them among the gathering crowd of gawkers who were staring at the shouting Watch and the smoking, still stone-shedding ruin of the shop. At Durnan's caution, he saw two more cold-eyed men, bareheaded but in full armor, approaching from where the innkeeper was facing.

"You have friends," Durnan observed calmly.

"I keep secrets," Taunamorla replied. "Go now, and keep your lives."

Mirt bowed to her and started away down the street, leaving behind only the comment, "We'll meet again, Lady of

Secrets."

Her reply was as calm as ever: "Of course."

They were halfway back to the Portal when fire mounted up into the night sky behind them with a roar that sent Mirt staggering.

"Keep going," Durnan said. "Whatever's happening, I'm sure the Keeper of Secrets is involved—and that we're better off draining tankards over our lancers and pondering what she is. Beyond a powerful spell hurler, that is."

"A powerful spell hurler with enemies," Mirt replied, as they hastened on together.

Another, larger blast followed, then far-off screams, splintering sounds, and what sounded like something very large-lunged roaring in pain—a protest that abruptly ended in yet another explosion.

Mirt glanced back, but could see nothing more than a lot of sparks and cinders, high above the roofs of Waterdeep. Then the horns of the Watch started—the full alarm-call that would summon the Guard, and mages, and—"The Portal" Durnan reminded his friend.

Mirt lurched two steps more along the way back to the inn before the air in front of them flickered, and the Keeper of Secrets was suddenly standing in front of them, her eyes glittering with anger.

"Gentlesirs, I find I need you," she said.

"Us? Upstanding merchants of Waterdeep?" Mirt grunted.

Taunamorla smiled thinly and said, "Indeed. Upstanding merchants of the city are precisely what I'm in need of, just now."

"How so?"

"Your word will be accepted by the Watch—and I can bargain with you."

"You want us to lie about something," Durnan observed.

"About what, and for what reward?"

"My thanks for your haste," the Keeper of Secrets said in a rush, giving him a smile that might warm most men's hearts.

"I will trade you all of Yelver's secrets for a few words of false testimony."

"Say on," Mirt rumbled. "What testimony?"

"To defend his very life, a friend of mine was just forced to trade spells with several Watchful Order mages. Men died—a lot of men, some of those mages and officers of the Watch among them—and I need you to swear that this friend of mine was with you, since you left my office earlier this night."

Durnan lifted a disbelieving eyebrow and replied, "Our word against many of the Watch? Lady, you overestimate our reputations. If they know they saw him, the protests of an innkeeper and a moneylender aren't going to—"

"When fighting the Watch, my friend wore a magical disguise. He looked like a dragon, not like himself."

Durnan cast a swift, questioning glance at Mirt—who looked straight at Taunamorla and shook his head.

"Nay," Mirt grunted. "Yelver's secrets were worth seventeen dragons to me—if they could lead to the recovery of all my loaned coins. Knowing just who an' what ye truly are—for peace of mind alone—could be worth much more, in the years ahead. So that would be my price. Full and honest answers to these: What manner of creature are ye, lady? When came ye to Waterdeep, an' why? The answer that stands behind keeping secrets for worms like Yelver, mind ye."

"Do you know what you're asking?" the Keeper of Secrets asked.

"Aye, lady, I believe I do."

Torches flickered behind them, and there were shouts. Cries of discovery from the Watch, and hastening feet. The woman in the green cloak glanced over Mirt and Durnan's shoulders, her mouth drawing down into a tight line.

"I'm out of time," she snapped. "I, Taunamorla, agree to this bargain. Do you, Durnan of Waterdeep? And do you, Mirt of Waterdeep?"

"Lady, I do," Durnan said. "By blood and my last coin I bind myself."

"Lady, I do," Mirt echoed, hard after his friend's words. "By blood an' my last coin I bind myself." And he added less formally, "Though 'twould help if we at least knew thy friend's name."

"Raumorth, he's called," the Keeper of Secrets said swiftly, as the Watch thundered down upon them in a thunder of running boots, clanging blades, and angry shouts. "I accept your bindings."

"And where is Raumorth?" Durnan asked urgently.

"Right behind you," Taunamorla hissed.

The two friends whirled around—to meet the cold smile of a man they'd seen before: the tall, cloaked man who'd been walking toward them as they'd questioned the Keeper near the ruins of her shop. His hands were raised—as if he'd been ready to blast Mirt and Durnan down. Not far beyond him was a running pack of armored men: a great mustering of the Watch.

"I'm a mage from Tethyr." Raumorth's voice was deep and rich. "You don't know me well, but you've befriended me—a trader and traveling investor who's visited Waterdeep once a season or so, for years."

"Of course," Durnan agreed, smiling at the man and stepping casually past him so that the foremost Watch officer's sword no longer had a clear path to Raumorth's back.

"Way! Make way! Stand aside, man!" that onrushing Watchman bellowed.

Mirt and Raumorth winked at each other—and obediently stepped back, Durnan with them, the three men parting like windblown leaves to leave the Watch a clear path to charge at... the Keeper of Secrets.

Who suddenly looked bewildered and flustered, as she squeaked, "Ohh! The Watch! The Watch!"

"Stand! Stand all, in silence! Down all arms!" a deeper,

grander voice commanded.

"My arms don't come off," Mirt explained innocently, "but I am standing."

By then the Watch had surrounded the four, and tense silence was falling. The officer who'd spoken glared coldly at the fat moneylender.

"I know you, Mirt."

"Yes," Mirt agreed with a broad smile. "As I recall, ye owe me eleven dragons, four shards—unless ye're late paying me by highsun tomorrow, whereupon—"

"Enough" barked the Watch commander. "Now keep silence for a moment or so." He turned his head deliberately to gaze at Durnan. "You're also known to me, Durnan of the Yawning Portal, in Castle Ward." "At your service."

"Undoubtedly. However, these two with you ___ Good lady, you were seen outside a certain shop this night, and stand under the suspicion of the Watch. Your name, citizenry, and trade."

The answer was a tremulous, "Taunamorla Esmurla, a scribe, formerly of Amn but now of Waterdeep. I—I've done nothing wrong!"

"And I," said Raumorth firmly, "am a trader from Tethyr, arrived in Waterdeep just this day, who stopped to talk with Mirt and Durnan, whom I've done business with in earlier visits down the years, and regard as friends. I've no intention of doing anything that merits pointing so many loaded crossbows at me, Watchmen, and I'd appreciate it if you'd lower them "

The crossbows wavered not a fingerbreadth, and the Watch commander scowled.

"You were seen outside that same shop," he snarled, "and were observed to change into the shape of a great dragon—"

"A fang dragon, sir," one of the other Watch officers murmured.

"A fang dragon, indeed," the commander continued, "and in that form did spell-battle with officers of the Watch,

including wizards acting in defense of this city and its peace and safe order. Wherefore I arres—"

"Hoy, hoy, hoy now!" Mirt protested. "Raumorth here's been with us for... well, since we all left Taunamorla's shop together. That was some time back, as we've not been walking all that swiftly, and—"

"Yes," Durnan said firmly, looking at the Watch commander. "I'd take it very poorly if my word was set aside, here on the street, before all the watching

city. Raumorth here's been walking with us. If he can somehow be in two places at once, changing into dragons and hurling spells all over the place, then he's a mightier mage than any I've ever heard of! Why don't we all go to Blackstaff Tower, right now, and you can ask them if such a thing's even possible. Raumorth's been walking at my side, alive and solid—I know, because I clapped him on the arm more than once!"

"Ohhh," Taunamorla gasped, going pale, "do you mean ... a dragon, lots of spells ... is my shop all right?"

The Watch commander blinked and asked, "What shop is yours, lady? I don't recall seeing a quill signboard anywhere near the..."

"I," Taunamorla Esmurla said, "am better known in Waterdeep as the Keeper of Secrets."

"What? Don't move..."

Several Watchmen shouted at once, and a crossbow fired, its quarrel humming off into the night sky.

Quietly and without any fuss, six hulking dragons had faded into view behind Taunamorla. There wasn't quite enough room in the street for the two at either end of the sudden great mountain of scaled flesh. Signboards and balcony railings shattered and fell like tossed kindling.

Raumorth made a swift, intricate gesture, and Mirt and Durnan felt their skin tingling. Then the mage clapped his hands to their forearms and towed them toward the nearest alley mouth, scant moments before Watch halberds stabbed

through—their own immobile images, that still stood in a cluster facing the raging Watch commander.

Who, like all the other Watchmen, didn't seem to notice the four as they fled into the alley together. That may have been because of Raumorth's spell—or it may have had something to do with six dragons lowering

their great horned heads, opening their jaws, and reaching forward long-taloned claws like gigantic cats. Or it might just have been because most of the Watch were fleeing down the street as fast as their hobnailed boots could take them.

In a dark, stinking corner where two alleys met, Raumorth raised a hand that crackled with ready magic.

"This," he said quietly, "will be where we part, men of Waterdeep: It's best if—"

"No, Raumorth," Taunamorla said. "I made a formal pact with these two."

"Lady! We—"

"Are as bad as the humans we revile if we cleave to their habits, casting aside our promises like empty chatter," she said in a voice that was suddenly steel edged with ice.

Raumorth bowed and said, "Truth ... yet this is a mistake. Pothoc ukris!"

"Perhaps. Yet consider this: once they know the truth about me, how will it profit them—save to force a little prudence on them? Who would believe them if they spread the tale?"

Raumorth's eyes glimmered like golden flames as he said, "There's something in that... yet it would take only one curious wizard deciding to seek the truth behind their words —"

"And when they know something of our numbers, they'll know that no mage could strike us all down at once. And it would only take one of us, knowing who must have told the wizard, to hunt them down and end their lives slowly and horribly, terrified beyond reason and with limbs torn from them at leisure."

Mirt shivered at the calmness in her voice, and the Keeper of

Secrets smiled at him as tenderly as a doting aunt.

"Yet none of this unpleasantness need happen. Raumorth, a shielding against all prying?"

The man who was more than a mage from Tethyr cast a swift, deft spell, and announced—as something like smoke turned solid and fell around them in a sudden, unbroken cloud—"Done."

"This is for your ears alone, Mirt and Durnan," Taunamorla murmured, "and is not to reach your tongues. I am what humans like to call a song dragon, and I came to Waterdeep over twenty summers ago, summoned by elders of my kin, to ... manage a problem here. I've been here ever since."

"A problem involving other dragons," Mirt rumbled, waving a hand at Raumorth. "Lots of other dragons."

The Keeper nodded.

"What problem?"

"Many dragons like to dwell among humans—and not only because your kind can serve as ready food, or as a source of wealth for us to seize and hoard. Some wyrms come to love your energy, your restlessness, your clever strivings..."

"The free entertainment we provide," Mirt grunted. Taunamorla smiled wryly and said, "Bluntly said, but true."

"Waterdeep is a fine cauldron of such things," Durnan put in.

"Yet a cauldron full of alert and wary wizards, sorcerers, and priests. Dragons need magic to hide among men. Magic that might well get noticed."

The Keeper turned to Raumorth and said, "You see? They knew, or suspected, already—and yet stood with us."

"Lady," Durnan said, "a few secrets are always preferable to the Watch and the Guard laying waste to several city blocks against some mighty foe."

"Nay, nay," Mirt said. "Let's discharge the bargain. Ye say it, Lady Taunamorla, plainly. Thy service in Waterdeep is—?"

"I am the guide and central contact for more than a few hidden-in-human-shape dragons dwelling in Waterdeep. We watch over things, manipulating and sometimes mind-

whispering to the Lords of Waterdeep—"

"And mind-blasting those who'd overthrow them," Raumorth interrupted.

Mirt nodded and said, "And yet... the wards? The Watchful Order? Hath no one seen ye for what ye are?"

"Who do you think had a hand in crafting the wards?" Raumorth asked.

"And some Waterdhavians have seen our true natures," the Keeper of Secrets added, "but seen fit to leave us alone."

"They have?"

"Of course," she replied. "They saw our work, and judged us."

She turned and started to walk away along one alley, Raumorth's shielding parting into a dark tunnel before her.

Mirt blinked. Raumorth was gone! Nay ... nay, he was the tunnel, stretching into a dark archway that arched up and around the Keeper, and moved away with her.

Taunamorla Esmurla turned to fix the two men with eyes that were suddenly larger and darker than before—and yet held many tiny stars.

"Why do you think," she asked Mirt and Durnan softly, "Waterdeep hasn't erupted into battle and ruin long ago? With Halaster and Skullport and Under-mountain below, and half the greedy grasping humans in Faerun visiting or dwelling above?"

The two men stood for a long time in the dark and empty alley, as Watch patrols trudged past.

"Six dragons, I tell thee! Six!" One Watchman growled, turning into the alley to empty his bladder thoughtfully into a discarded cask. "And gone, like a mage's tricks! Yet they were real. They broke the balcony clear off Shandledorth's."

"Aye, I saw. A wizard playing at snatch-teleport, mayhap? Thrusting a lairful of dragons into our laps and whisking them away again?"

"Why play such games?"

"To impress nobles who hired him? To awe revel guests? To

make a name for himself, or pass some test?"

"If he's a wizard, that's reason enough for all manner of lunacy," an older Watchman said.

There was a general grunt of agreement, and the patrol left the alley again, and moved on.

Mirt glanced up past dark shutters and rooftops, to where the stars glimmered, and growled, "There's ... something magnificent about being a dragon. Something grander than we are. Something..."

"We don't understand," Durnan finished his friend's sentence. "Now let's be getting home. 'Tis late—or rather, early—and Luranla's probably thrashed all the sailors in the Portal senseless by now."

Mirt snorted, "Think she's a dragon, in disguise?"

Durnan shook his head. "No. Oh, no. You ask her, and I'll watch from a safe distance. Tethyr, perhaps."

THE TOPAZ DRAGON

Jess Lebow

The Year of the Turret (1360 DR)

Up ahead, Kraxx could see the sun's light reflecting from the shell of her one perfect, topaz egg. The egg that only moments before had been stolen from her lair.

She could catch the thieves if she were on open ground. She would dive on them from above, dismantling their mangy little bodies one at a time. She would bite their heads off and smash their bones into pulp. Then, just for the sheer pleasure of it, she would smear their remains across the land, leaving the stain as a reminder for all those who would dare steal from her again.

But the thieves were smaller than her, more agile and able to maneuver through the jungle, and the island had little open ground. Only the short sandy beach and the open caldera of

the island's active volcano escaped from the clawing jungle that covered everything else. The trees parted as the great topaz dragon forced her bulk through the brush.

Up ahead, the egg disappeared from her view. With a final desperate burst of speed, the dragon broke through the last of the trees, emerging at the base of the basalt mountain in the middle of the island. She caught one last glimpse of her egg, shining golden and orange in the mid-afternoon sun. Then it was gone, carried into a lava tube at the base of the volcano.

Unfurling her wings, Kraxx closed the distance with one quick sweep. Slamming her head into the lava tube, she let out a tremendous roar, shaking the walls and spraying the inside of the tunnel with her billowing breath. But it was too late. The thieves were already beyond the reach of her attack. She clawed forward, but it was no use. Her body got stuck at the shoulders. She was simply too large to fit inside. Pulling herself out of the tunnel, Kraxx took to the air, circling the volcano. It had not been the first time her eggs had attracted the attentions of the greedy and the powerful. There were those who would pay dearly for such a prize—including the dracolich who lived deep within the volcano.

Kraxx watched the molten lava bubble from the top of the open basalt mound. No, she-would not take the undead creature's bait. She would have no chance of defeating him there, inside his own lair. But if he could get the egg inside without coming out, then perhaps she could get it out without going in.

With a keening wail, the topaz dragon turned away from her circling and glided back out over the jungle, toward the ocean.

!GOS—*

A loud crack rattled the windows of the captain's cabin, and every pirate aboard Expatriate let out a hoot.

Captain Clay came out into the sunlight, absently flipping one of his twin daggers in his left hand. The sky was a perfect clear blue. The sea was at a dead calm, except for the hint of a tiny ripple.

Lifting a handkerchief to his face, he wiped the ever present

line of sweat off of his brow then looked up at the billowing sail. A smile spread across his parched, withered lips. It wasn't a hard wind, but it was wind all the same.

"Mr. Mansa. In my cabin."

A portly man turned away from the bustling crew and answered, "Aye, Cap'n."

Inside it wasn't much cooler than on the deck. Even though the windows were open, there hadn't been a breath of wind, not even the slightest breeze, in so long.

Clay sat down behind his large oak desk. Sifting through a pile of parchment, he selected one that was to his liking and unrolled it.

"You wanted to see me, Cap'n?"

"Aye, Mr. Mansa," said the captain without looking up. "Now that we have some wind, I want to discuss our course of action."

"Should I round up the other mates?"

"In good time, Mansa, but for now, I'd like to figure out where we're going and set a course while the winds are in our favor." Captain Clay pinned the corners of the parchment down with four stones and ran his hand over the worn map.

"The sooner we find that island the sooner we claim our prize."

"And all become rich," said the first mate. "Praise Umberlee," he added

The captain chuckled, and a smile spread across his face. He couldn't help himself. Treasure always made him smile.

"Aye, Mansa. Once we have that egg, we'll be rich men indeed."

Clay's fingers traversed the miniature Sword Coast, lifting off the page when they reached the Nelanther Isles, as if touching them might burn his flesh, then dropping back down after they crossed Asavir's Channel. They continued on, dipping quickly into the Shining Sea, casually bypassing Calimshan and Tethyr, then following the Chultan peninsula to the edge of the Wild Coast. There Captain Clay circled his

index finger in a wide berth. The weathered map crackled.

"We're here." Under his finger, the pirate captain indicated the open sea. "And—"

"Captain. Captain!" A skinny man came bursting into Clay's chamber calling, "Captain, come quick."

Clay stood up and asked, "What is it, Tasca?"

"You wouldn't believe it if I told you. You better come see for yourself."

Clay bolted out from around his desk, Mansa close behind. Just outside the door of his chamber, the world went white. A thick fog had rolled in. The warm sweat that had plagued his brow was suddenly cool. The dampness on his face was transformed in an instant from sweat into dew. Looking out over amidships, Captain Clay couldn't even make out the mainsail.

Over the side of the ship, what had been mile upon mile of endless open ocean and clear blue sky was nothing more than a gauzy film that seemed to have swallowed the entire world. Even the sun was blotted out by the billowing whiteness.

The wind picked-up, and the partially slack sail snapped taut. Clay could hear Expatriate's deep hull slipping through the water.

"What in the name of Talos?" the captain murmured. "Where did this fog come from?"

Tasca shrugged and said, "Dunno. It just arrived."

"You didn't see it roll in?"

"No, Cap'n," Tasca replied. "Like I said, one minute it was clear, the next, fog. It was like the sea itself just lifted its hands and covered us up."

"We must be getting close," Clay said. He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Come to Captain Clay you great big topaz egg," he whispered.

Members of the crew began to materialize out of the thick mist. Every one of them carried something-belaying pins, hooks, lengths of chain, or broken bits of wooden crates. The

captain had seen it before.

"All right lads, let's just calm down."

The crew began to grumble.

"It's witchery," shouted one.

"No good can come of this," shouted another.

Captain Clay raised his hands, and the men quieted.

"Now listen, you swabbies, all of you, back to your posts. Keep your eyes peeled and a sturdy piece of wood nearby. Mind that you don't fall over the edge, and we'll get what we've come for. Understood?"

"Aye, Cap'n," came the collective response.

"Very good," he said, then he turned and headed back into his cabin. "Mr. Mansa."

"Cap'n?"

"Round up the other mates." "Aye, aye."

Inside, Clay stepped behind his desk and stared down at the map. He laughed. He didn't need to look at it anymore. The jagged lines of the coast were permanently burned into his memory. For three tendays he'd stared down on that same wrinkled, brown parchment while Expatriate had sat off the coast of Chult searching for the island. First no wind, then the fog, were the gods conspiring to keep him away from that dragon's egg?

Mansa knocked on the cabin threshold and called, "Cap'n?"

Clay looked up. Mansa was flanked by a half-ore and a dwarf.

"Come in, gentlemen."

The half-ore was garbed in little more than torn rags, held together by a series of belts and straps at strategic points along his waist, biceps, and thighs. His hair was pulled back in a tight pony tail and held in place by a strip of thick, rancid-looking black hide. At the end of his left arm, where most other sailors had a hand, the half-ore had a wicked-tipped blade strapped to his ruined stump.

The dwarf on the other hand looked as if he'd just stepped out of a fancy inn after a good night's sleep and a bath. His beard was in three long braids all tied together—near his

knees—to a shiny brass ring. A clean, dry rolled bandanna of yellow silk covered the top of his head, a perfect accompaniment to his blue pantaloons and purple vest. He wore a series of golden rings in one ear. His burley bare arms were covered in tattoos of mermaids drinking flagons of ale. On his belt swung a jeweled sheath with a keen-edged rapier inside.

The collected mates entered, each taking a chair around the heavy desk.

Clay steepled his fingers in front of his chin and asked, "Any guesses about this mysterious fog?" He looked to the dwarf. "Mr. Tabor?"

The immaculately dressed mate shook his head and replied, "I'd say we're getting close."

Clay nodded.

"Mr. Hadar?"

The half-ore grunted, "Smells of witchcraft to me."

Clay slapped the desk and said, "Aye. Which means someone doesn't want us to find what we're looking for. I'd wager my weight in gold that when we find our island we'll find the mage responsible for our bad luck."

The three mates shook their heads.

The ship's timbers complained, creaking and screeching under the sudden pressure. There was a crunching sound, followed by a long, slow grind, and Expatriate lurched. The captain's heavy desk shifted, adding to the noise, and the three mates were thrown to the floor. Captain Clay went sprawling over the top of his desk, thrashing the map and the stones that held it open and sending them flying.

"What the-?"

Clay's words were cut short.

"Land ho!"

The captain got to his feet and scrambled onto the deck, followed closely by the dwarf and the half-ore. The sky overhead was visible, the sun coming through a large hole in the sheath that had covered the ship. Where before the

amidships had been socked in by fog, traces of the ship were revealed. The thick mist seemed to dissolve, dropping away from the planks and sails as if it were a wave, already spent, slowly drifting back into the sea.

Tasca was facedown on the deck, surrounded by at least five other sailors, all pulling splinters out of their palms. The lookout, perched high up on the mainmast, hung to the edge of the crow's nest by one hand. His legs dangled below him as he surveyed the deck and the spilled pirates.

As the foggy whiteness drifted away, Captain Clay got his first look at what had caused all the commotion.

"Shiver me timbers," he whispered.

Before him, not more than a league ahead of Expatriate's bow, sat an active volcano. A column of sooty smoke rose out of its top, and a bright line of orange-red lava rolled down its side.

Clay dashed down across the deck. Leaning out over the spinnaker, he looked down on a rocky beach.

"Mr. Mansa," he shouted.

The portly mate had just managed to pull himself up off the floor of the captain's cabin and stagger out to the deck.

"Aye."

"We're going ashore."

"Aye, cap'n," replied the first mate. "I'll gather the repair party."

The damage wasn't extensive, but the ship was taking on water. Expatriate had come ashore quite softly, only crashing to a halt when its hull collided with a huge, melted piece of basalt jutting up from the bottom of the sea.

Once the leak was fixed, it wouldn't take much to get the boys to push her off the sand and get her back out to sea. The crew Mansa had rounded up was coming off the ship. It would take them at least a few hours, if not a few days, to fix the hole. Then a few more hours to bail the hold.

"You know the drill, gentlemen," shouted the captain. He strode toward the jungle in the near distance. "Let's cut

some lumber and patch her up."

Machetes in hand and with little more than a grumble, the entire crew, save for those few unfortunates left aboard to mind the ship, followed their captain across the blistering shore.

Reaching the edge of the trees, Clay turned around to take a look at Expatriate. His ship seemed to flicker in and out of existence, disappearing in a wave of heat as if it were caught in a raging storm deep at sea.

"Split into pairs," ordered the captain. "Each of you take a strong tree back to the ship."

"Aye, cap'n," they said in unison.

The pirates split up, searching the jungle. Clay turned to his mates.

"We'll leave them to their task," he said with a smile, "and get on with ours."

The three mates nodded and silently followed their captain into the jungle. The trees were tall and thin, and the ground was completely bald in large patches, as if it were swept clean by a legion of maidens with brooms. That far off the water, the damp humidity was even more noticeable. Having spent most of his life on the high seas, Clay was not unaccustomed to warm, damp weather. Somehow, though, being surrounded on all sides by an ocean made the humidity seem more natural, more welcome. There, deep inside a tropical jungle, it just seemed wrong.

When he got deep enough into the jungle that he could no longer hear the chopping and cussing of his sailors, Clay sat down on the soft earth and unrolled his map.

Mr. Mansa lowered his portly girth down beside him. The dwarf and the half-ore stood on either side.

"Any guesses where we are, Mr. Mansa?" asked the captain.

Mansa leaned over the map, dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief.

He pointed at a small island and said, "Here, Cap'n."

"TheMother-of-Mists?"

"Aye."

"Not even in a hurricane could we travel that far in less than a day." The captain pushed his first mate's hand out of the way and continued, "At dawn, just before the mists, I spotted the southern tip of the Kobold Mountains. That's nearly four hundred miles."

Mansa shrugged and said, "There aren't any other islands out here. Never has been."

"It doesn't seem possible," the captain said. "Then again, neither did that fog." He looked up at the half-ore. "Hadar, you know these waters better than any of us. What say you?"

The half-ore didn't even look at the map, just said, "The Dead Islands are farther north."

"The Dead Islands?" asked the captain.

Hadar explained, "Those islands at the far south end of the Nelanther chain with no fresh water and nothing a pirate could want." The half-ore shook his head. "Ain't good for nothin' except dyin' on."

Something rattled the trees in the near distance. Hadar dropped into a crouch, dashed between a pair of trees, and disappeared into the jungle. Tabor stepped sideways and seemed to simply melt into the shadows under the canopy. Mansa leaped to his feet as quick as a cat, moving as if he was a man half his size and a third his age.

Clay too was ready, gripping one of his daggers by the gleaming, polished steel blade. He ran his eyes over the immediate vicinity. Out on the waves, Clay had some of the best eyes around, being able to spot fat cargo ships long before some elves even. But in the dense, dark jungle, he was at a disadvantage.

Behind him, another crash rumbled through the jungle, shaking the ground. Mansa nearly jumped, startled by the sudden sound. Then the man let out a squeal and backstepped. Twisting, the pudgy man fell onto his rump. Clawing the ground, Mansa tried to push himself backward

but slipped and landed flat on his back.

Clay spun around to look up into the most terrible face he'd ever laid eyes upon

Eye's burning red like the fires of the Abyss looked down over huge flaring nostrils, covered in yellow-orange scales.

Crystalline fangs jutted out of its upper

and lower jaw, crisscrossing on either side of the creature's mouth like the bones of the Jolly Roger.

Captain Clay staggered back a step and stammered, "D-d-dragon."

The creature stood on its hind legs, its wings pressed back against its considerable bulk. Hunched, the dragon's shoulders reached nearly to the top of the jungle canopy. Huge bony spurs jutted out of its hide along its spine and the length of its tail. Its long neck, thick and heavily muscled, snaked down from high above.

Though the monster's enormous head filled most of Clay's vision, he could see that the creature held both Tabor and Hadar captive, one in each of its front claws.

The dragon let out a short, powerful breath through its nostrils, and a plume of watery vapor floated out.

Trying to remain calm in the face of such a beast, Clay lifted one of his daggers, prepared to throw.

"That would not be wise," bellowed the dragon.

The captain looked to Mansa—still flat on his back-nodded, then lowered his hand.

"So," the captain asked the dragon, "what happens now?"

The wyrm's eyes narrowed and it replied, "We parlay." Clay swallowed.

"All right. I'm Captain Clay." He looked again at Mansa. The portly mate shrugged. "This is my first mate, Mansa. And those two—" the captain indicated the two pirates the dragon held in its grasp—"are Hadar and Tabor, also mates." The dragon's eyes shifted from Clay to Mansa then back again.

"Before we begin," Clay said, nodding again at the trapped

mates. "I would ask you to release your captives."

The dragon snorted and said, "You are in no position to ask for concessions."

"Then as a show of good faith."

The pirate captain slipped his dagger back into its sheath.

The dragon growled but released the two pirates.

Clay lifted his hands, showing his empty palms. "Our ship, Expatriate, was beached—"

"I know how you got here," interrupted the dragon. "I brought you."

Clay understood.

"So you're the mage."

The dragon didn't reply.

Clay had been in similar sorts of negotiations before, though never with a dragon. He took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, then tried to proceed as if he was talking to a rival captain.

"So, what is it you want of us?"

"You've come for my egg," replied the dragon.

"Egg?" bluffed Clay. "We don't know anything about any egg, our ship was run aground—"

The dragon blew out another strong breath, its lip curling, as it said, "Do not play games with me, human. I know why you were looking for this island. You've come to barter with the thieves for my egg."

A cold lance of fear shot up Clay's spine.

"Are you going to kill us?"

The dragon leaned back, giving the captain a bit more space, and said, "That depends." "On?"

"You're not the only ones who have an interest in my egg," explained the dragon. "The thieves who stole it have taken it deep into the volcano where I cannot go—"

"What do you want from us?"

"I want you to go in and retrieve my egg."

The captain cocked his head, a bit confused. "You want us to retrieve your egg?" "That is what I said," replied the dragon.

The captain laughed.

"If whoever took your egg is so powerful..." Clay struggled for the right words. "If you can't retrieve it yourself, what makes you think we'll be able to get it back for you?"

The dragon reared back, crossing its mighty fore-limbs over her golden chest. Her eyes burned an even darker red.

"The thieves are not mighty. They are cowardly and small," the dragon said, looking at each of the pirates in turn. "And that is the problem. They have taken my egg into the volcano where they have wards and magical protections against one of my kind. Out here, I would crush them, but I cannot follow them into their lair."

"What's in it for us?" asked the captain. "If what you say is true, and we did come here for your egg, then what's stopping us from just taking it and carrying it off in our ship?"

The dragon snorted, blowing another plume of watery vapor out that nearly reached Clay.

"If you do I will destroy your ship and kill you all."

"Let me get this straight," said the captain. "Either we risk our lives trying to retrieve your egg from the inside of the volcano, or we die." Clay crossed his arms over his chest.

"That's not much of a deal."

"If you succeed," said the dragon, "I will let you go—unharméd."

"That's very kind of you."

"I have gold," added the dragon. "Lot's of gold."

A smile spread across Clay's face. "What did you say your name was?"

"Kraxx," replied the dragon.

Captain Clay placed his palms together and bowed as he'd seen men do in his travels to far Kara Tur.

"Well, Kraxx, I think you have yourself a deal."

The dragon lifted one of her wings, pointing deeper into the jungle.

"The thieves took my egg into a lava tube on the southern

slope," Kraxx said as she turned and headed toward the beach. "I will be awaiting your return, beside your ship. If you are not back by nightfall, your crew will die."

At the southern slope, just where the dragon said it would be, a circular opening led into the rough basalt mountain. Unlike the rest of the jungle, the base of the volcano was completely void of all vegetation. The smell of burned plants and sulfur filled the air.

"Well, maties," said Clay, gripping the hilt of one of his daggers, "it's down the hatch for us."

The captain entered the dark opening. One step over the threshold and Clay's damp skin became instantly dry. It was as if his whole body had been wrapped tight in a curtain of hot, dry air, and he felt as if he'd just stepped inside the bellows of an iron forge. Every strip of exposed flesh was pressed back by the oppressive heat, and the captain had to squint to keep his eyes from drying out quicker than he could blink.

The passage was narrow—barely wide enough for two men abreast—and dark except for the sunlight coming in from outside. Ahead, it appeared as if the tunnel they were following made a very subtle turn to the right. Clay couldn't make out much more. The light simply didn't penetrate that far. Clay looked back over his shoulder.

"Tabor," he called quietly.

"Aye."

"You're going to need to take the lead," said Clay. He stepped aside to let the dwarf pass. "In this darkness, my eyes are about as good as a Veldornian mainsail."

"You're too hard on the Veldornians," quipped the dwarf as he made his way past his captain. "They may not have much use for a sail, but even they could make one that works better than your old human eyes."

Both Mansa and Hadar let out a snicker.

Clay ushered the half-ore up next to the dwarf. Hadar grunted, then he and the dwarf headed down the passage.

The farther they went, the darker it became. Soon Clay couldn't see anything at all. He followed the sounds of the half-ore's footsteps and ran his hand along the wall to make sure he didn't fall over. At first the wall was rough, like pumice. Clay just let his fingertips rest against the rough surface, using the feeling of solid stone to reassure him as they plunged deeper into the volcano. But after a time, the stone became smooth. The deep crevices and sharp ridges gave way to a soft, almost polished feel, and the walls grew warmer.

"This volcano reminds me of the Peak of Flame," said Mansa.

"It's not the Peak of Flame," said Hadar.

"But what if it is?" replied the portly pirate. "Maybe Dendar the Night Serpent took the dragon's egg."

"This isn't the Peak of Flame," repeated the half-ore.

"I'm just sayin'. We don't know where we are. This could be the Peak, and if it is, and the Serpent took the dragon's egg, then this is the beginning of the end."

Clay heard a scuffle, then he felt his chin run smack into Hadar's back.

"This isn't the Peak of Flame", Hadar said one more time.

They continued on. Around the next corner Clay began to see a faint red-orange glow. The smooth rock reflected the light, making the ground and the walls look quite slick. The farther they went, the brighter the light became. The curve in the passage continued around and finally opened into a large chamber.

A snaking pool of bubbling lava split the room in half. A walkway of hardened stone ran along each edge toward an opening on the other end. The red-orange of the molten stuff lit the room, exposing several jagged shelves and pillars of cooled lava.

"Look out!" shouted Tabor.

A dark figure fell upon them, concealed from above by one of the basalt shelves. Clay shifted to his right, bringing his dagger up with his left hand. The creature landed square

upon the polished steel blade, and it let out a terrible noise—a scream that sounded like the combined anguish of a man and a wolf.

Still unable to make out what was attacking him, Clay pulled his impaled blade from the creature and swung back across its body. The beast lifted its head, its eyes locking with Clay's. The captain's dagger connected with the creature's neck, and the beast slumped to the ground, thrashing once then falling still.

Clay stepped back from the body. For lack of a better name, the creature on the ground before him was a dwarf. It was short and squat, and its arms, chest, and legs were thick with ropy muscle. But other than general size and shape, the thing had no other resemblance to the civilized Tabor.

"Tabor, it's your cousin," quipped the half-ore.

"Laugh it up, pig boy," spat the dwarf.

"Enough." Clay leaned over the creature and asked, "What is this thing?"

"Looks like a wild dwarf," Tabor replied.

"A wild dwarf?"

"Not our greatest moment," Tabor admitted.

A loud hoot echoed through the chamber, and there wasn't time for further discussion. More of the scraggly figures dropped from the overhead shelves, filling the room. Clay and his mates were under attack by nearly two dozen wild dwarves.

In an instant Tabor had his rapier out and skewered the first of the mangy dwarves through the gut. Hadar ran another through with his stump knife. Mansa grabbed one by the forearms, locked into a grapple, but that was all Clay saw. The chamber turned into a flurry of claws and flying steel. The pirate captain knocked one attacker to the ground, burying a thrown dagger in his eye socket. Dodging left and right, slashing at eyes and avoiding teeth, he danced with the growling foes.

At one point he heard Mansa shout some words of praise to

Umberlee. There was a brief flash of yellow light and half of the dwarves cowered from the portly pirate as if they had seen a pit fiend. In the clearing they left, Clay could see the bodies of at least half a dozen of the wild dwarves, lying at the feet of his mates. He'd killed three himself, and several were either cowering against the far wall or outright fleeing the chamber.

Hadar cut another through the belly, lifting a second off the ground with his good hand and hurling it into the bubbling lava. The creature let out a howling wail, and it thrashed like a man overboard in a tempest. Tendrils of black smoke rose from the dwarf's body, and its sustained cry of pain grew in pitch. Those bits of exposed flesh that weren't already submerged in the magma burst into flame, and in a flash of orange-yellow, the flailing dwarf was consumed.

Two of the wild dwarves stood before Tabor, menacing him with their claws, but the well-dressed pirate held them both at bay with the tip of his rapier. He was cut across the face, and his normally well-kept pantaloons had a large tear across his thigh. Though bloodied, he looked no worse for the fight than just a couple of scrapes.

The half-ore was another story. From head to toe he was covered in blood. There was no way to know if it was his own or the blood of his foes. Most of the time, he wielded his stump knife with great finesse. But sometimes his bloodlust got to him, and he became a bit more messy.

"What I wouldn't give to be back in the Copper Coronet right now," mumbled the captain under his breath.

Clay remained mostly untouched. The first of the mangy creatures had caught hold of his left hand with its grimy claws. He had a painful cut along his thumb and down his forearm, but he'd had worse. During the course of the fight, all four pirates had worked their way into the middle of the room. They were precariously close to the pool of lava, and the captain took a step back from the edge, just for good measure.

Turning to check on Mansa, he heard the first mate yell, "Look out!"

Clay glanced up just in time to see another wave of dwarves climbing toward them. Unlike those they had fought in the first wave, some carried heavy clubs and several even had good steel weapons. If it was the whole tribe, Clay had no intention of parlaying with their leader.

"Run!" he shouted.

Reaching the opening on the other end, Clay glanced back over his shoulder. Tabor was right on his heels. Mansa was several steps behind, and Hadar was covering the rear. There must have been at least fifty wild dwarves already on the cavern floor, and more poured down the walls.

Ducking his head, Clay plunged himself into the pitch-black tunnel, fleeing what was surely a massacre. His right hand on the wall, his eyes open as wide as they would go, Clay charged through the tunnel as fast as his feet could carry him. At any moment he expected to be knocked flat by a low hanging stalagmite. Behind him he could hear the labored breathing of his mates and the cacophony of footsteps of their pursuers.

The dark cavern took a sharp right turn, and Clay nearly lost his balance making the corner.

"Hard starboard," he shouted, then he dashed on.

Around the corner, the light began to grow. Bursting out of the darkness, Clay entered a large, hollowed-out chamber. The floor roiled and popped, being little more than a lake of molten lava. A narrow ledge snaked its way halfway across the chamber along the cavern walls. Overhead, huge stalactites hung from a shadowy ceiling, looking like inverted mountaintops.

In the center of the molten lake, splayed out over a mound of hardened black stone were five glowing pillars arranged in a semicircle. They seemed to defy everything about the place. Made from a translucent blue stone lit from inside by a brilliant white light, the pillars looked like huge icicles,

light and cool in the smoldering bowls of an active volcano. In the center of the crystals, inscribed on the basalt of the cavern floor, was a series of arcane runes, lit just like the pillars, each touching the next until together they made a half-moon shape. At the focal point of the two crescents sat a tremendous gemstone.

"Praise the Bitch Queen," blurted Mansa.

The first mate froze, his eyes locked on the precious stone as if it were a siren. As big as the world's largest half ling, the teardrop-shaped topaz glowed a deep orange-red, lit by the molten lava.

"The dragon's egg," whispered Clay.

The island the egg sat upon was surrounded on all sides by burbling lava, except for a small walkway that led to a large opening at the far end of the cavern.

The first of the dwarves began pouring into the chamber. The mangy creatures seemed to almost roll over one another in a frenzy to reach the four pirates. Hadar was already in a crouch, ready to take the first of them. Tabor pushed past Mansa to back up the half-ore. Balancing on the ledge of hardened lava, he held his rapier poised to strike.

"We're trapped," Clay said as he looked to the hardened lava island. It was too far to jump. He pulled his daggers and prepared to fight. "If you've got any bright ideas or last words, now would be a good time to voice 'em."

The scrabbling sounds of the wild dwarves racing around the edge of the chamber came to an abrupt stop. The riling mass turned toward the small entrance to the cavern and collectively dropped to their knees.

Through the sudden silence, a voice boomed through the cave, "Who dares enter the chamber of Ras Nsi?"

From out of the darkness a figure appeared. Tall and lean, his skin looked pale and unhealthy even in the ruddy red glow of the molten lake. His eyes were sunken and his head shaved. But the most remarkable feature was a blue triangle, tattooed in the middle of the man's forehead.

Clay turned to Hadar and asked, "Ras Nsi?"

The half-ore replied, "A bara who hunted down and exterminated the Eshowe people for their crimes against Ubato." Hadar glanced back at his captain. "That was four thousand years ago."

"You recognize that mark?" Clay asked, pointing to his own forehead.

"It's from Mezo," said the half-ore. "The holy city." "What does it mean?"

Hadar's lip curled up, and he turned his gaze to the tattooed man.

"It means he's a criminal," said the half-ore, "and he's been banished from the city."

"Aye," said the captain. "The kind of man who gives respectable criminals a bad name."

The tattooed man walked farther into the room, around several of the prostrate dwarfs.

"Bow to Ras Nsi," he bellowed. "I command you."

"We are the officers of Expatriate, the scourge of the Shining Sea," Clay shouted back. "We take commands from no one."

The tattooed man raised his hands in the air and began chanting. His voice grew deeper, echoing off the basalt walls, doubling then redoubling as it built upon itself. Then he bit off his last word, throwing his arms out to his sides.

The shadows seemed to coalesce, unhitching themselves from the basalt and wrapping themselves around the pale, tattooed man. His body began to grow, changing shape. His head lifted toward the top of the cavern. His arms extended, turning long and wispy, unfolding and unfolding again until they looked like the sails of a pirate ship. And his fingers grew sharp, transforming into wicked-looking claws.

The man claiming to be Ras Nsi transformed completely into a skeletal, undead dragon. Clay swallowed hard.

"That's a pretty good trick for a guy four thousand years old," said the captain.

The undead dragon clawed at the ground once, and opened

it skeletal mouth with a screech. Jags of lightning shot from the creature's open jaw, banishing the remaining shadows with an eerie blue-white light.

All four pirates scattered, diving to the deck. Clay felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise as the magical bolts struck the wall just over his head and ricocheted toward the ceiling. The magical energies bounced back and forth between two stalactites, and bits of broken stone crumbled to the floor.

A loud snap filled the chamber, and Clay looked up to see the larger of the two stalactites shake once then plummet toward him. Kicking his feet over his head, the pirate captain rolled backward. Coming to his feet, Clay hurled himself against the cavern wall, trying to make his body as small as possible.

The tip of the stalactite impacted the floor, just where Clay had been lying. The stone shelf collapsed under the weight, and the inverted mountaintop slipped sideways into the molten lake. Toppling to one side, the broken end of the stalactite crashed down atop the hardened lava island right beside the dragon's egg.

The other three pirates got to their feet, and so too did the wild dwarves.

"We'll never take 'em lads," shouted the captain.

With that, Clay jumped on the fallen stalactite and made for the other side as if he were running across a boarding plank. The blackened stone hadn't fully come to rest, and it shifted as the captain crossed it. Used to the shifting movement of the ocean, Clay took one more step then leaped over the lake of lava toward the island at its center. For a brief moment, the pirate captain hung in the air, his legs suspended over nothing but instant burning death. Then his toe touched down, and he dived forward, clawing at the solid rock.

The sharp pumice tore at his hands and shredded his pantaloons, but the tiny island was stable, and he wasn't

sinking into the lava. Scrambling to his feet, he moved away from the edge and turned to help his mates.

Tabor and Hadar were already across the makeshift boarding plank. The dwarf leaped off, tumbling once then coming to his feet with a practiced flair. The half-ore was less dramatic, but his strong legs hurled him over the molten lake without much difficulty.

Mansa, however, was a different story.

The first mate had lost his balance, and he clung to the side of the slowly sinking stalactite. Right behind him, the wild dwarves had made it to the edge and were beginning to climb onto the stone bridge.

Without blinking, Clay jumped back onto the perilous basalt column.

"Hadar, Tabor, grab hold of this end."

The dwarf and the half-ore did as they were told.

With two great bounding leaps, Clay was at his first mate's side. With one hand he grabbed the back of Mansa's tunic. With the other, he hurled one of his daggers at the first of the oncoming wild dwarves.

The mangy little creature took the blade in the chest and reeled back, falling into the next dwarf and blocking the path.

With Clay's help, Mansa managed to get to his knees.

"Good enough," said the captain.

Turning around, Clay charged back toward the island, the egg, and his two other mates, partially dragging Mansa behind him.

"Shove it in," he shouted.

Hadar and Tabor didn't hesitate. Both men leaned in and pushed the stalactite with all of their might. The column made a brief grinding sound, then the end that had landed on the island came free.

Clay pulled Mansa forward and shouted, "Jump, you swabbie."

He hurled himself once again over the bubbling lake of lava.

One instant he was in midair, the next he was crashing into Tabor and flopping to the ground.

Mansa had a similar landing, smashing into the solid, outstretched arms of the half-ore.

Without the support of the island the fallen stalactite turned sideways and slipped completely under the scorching lava. Those wild dwarves still standing on it fell in as well, trashing momentarily then dissolving in a cone of flame and smoke.

Clay got to his feet.

"Come on you swabs," shouted the captain "Grab the booty and get back to the ship." He looked out over the lava at the fuming dracolich. "This is a fight we can't win."

The four sailors lifted the dragon's egg off the ritualistic semicircle and carried it through the tunnel at the far end of the chamber. As they disappeared into darkness, Clay could hear the undead dragon let out a howling roar.

The egg was heavy, and it slowed their progress through the tunnel. Tabor led the way, shouting commands back to his comrades. With their prize between them it was easy enough to stay together. The four pirates ran and ran, the tunnel getting smaller and smaller the farther they went.

Around a final corner, they could see the sunlight coming in from the mouth of the lava tube. As fast as they could with the egg between them, the pirates finally made it out into the light of day. The sun's bright rays were beginning to go down.

"Let's just hope there's enough sun left in this day to save the rest of the crew," Clay said as he headed toward the thick brush. "Into the jungle."

Bowling blindly through the trees, the pirates ran with all of their might. Slowly the trees and vegetation became less dense, and the dying light of the setting sun became brighter. With a final few steps, the pirates flung their weary bodies out of the jungle and onto the beach.

Out in the open, a huge dark cloud passed over them,

and all four stopped dead in their tracks, dropping the egg-Standing before them, its unfurled wings nearly blotting out the sunlight, was the undead dragon. "No one steals from Ras Nsi," said the hulking beast.

The undead dragon swept its wings forward and opened its jaw again, preparing to shoot lightning at the helpless sailors.

Clay reached for one of his daggers, but his fingers grasped an empty bandoleer, and he felt the pit of his stomach sink as if it were a boulder into the deep.. Behind the dragon, he could just make out the silhouette of Expatriate. That ship had been good to him. Hed miss it.

Just then the wind picked up. The palm fronds on the trees behind them began to whistle, and the sand swept back and forth in the turbulent air. The undead dragon looked around wildly, searching the sky and the beach.

"Look," shouted Mansa, pointing to the sky.

Clay followed the first mate's finger to see a yellow-orange blur streaking toward the beach.

There was a high-pitched whistling shriek, and the undead dragon reeled back, lifting one claw into the air. The yellow-orange streak transformed into a topaz dragon, its razor talons tearing one of the undead dragon's wings from its body as it collided with the beach, pinning the dracolich to the ground and throwing sand in the air.

"No one steals from Kraxx", roared the topaz, swiping its powerful fore claws across her foe's throat.

The undead dragon let out a strangled cry, trying feebly to fight back with only one wing and the rest of its body trapped under the larger dragon's weight.

"You have no wards against me out here," taunted Kraxx.

The topaz dragon bit down on the dracolich's chest and shook her head. Bits of gore-soaked flesh rained * down on the blackened sand and the pirates had to cover their heads. The undead dragon struggled on, thrashing under the

attack.

A moment more, and its body went slack, succumbing to the larger dragon.

Still Kraxx did not slow her assault. The topaz dragon went to work on the carcass. Tearing bits of flesh away from the bones like a hungry seagull. Littering the beach with the undead dragon's remains.

Finally, Clay had to turn away. There were some things even a pirate couldn't stomach.

Clay leaned against the rail of his ship, smiling as he looked out at the retreating volcano. They sailed northwest, around the point of the Chultan peninsula toward the Shining Sea. He absently twirled a gold piece between his fingers, and his smile grew even larger as he thought about the pile of treasure safely resting in Expatriate's hold. Not even the egg of a topaz dragon would have fetched that much coin. Not a bad couple days of work, he thought.

High over his head, the mainsail billowed, full of as much wind as she could carry. At the top of the mast the Jolly Roger flew, and at its side a new flag waved in the magical breeze. It bore the silhouette of a dragon—yellow and orange with glowing red eyes.

WICKLESS IN THE NETHER

R.A. Salvatore

The Year of the Banner (1368 DR)

For a long time and across many storefronts and kiosks, he could not be seen because he did not want to be seen. For Artemis Entreri, with so many years of living in the shadows, it was as easy as that. He moved along Wall Way, a solitary figure perusing the mercantile district of the Damarran Capital of Helio-gabalus on a stormy night. Torrential rains sent small rivers running along the sides of the cobblestoned street, named because of its proximity to Heliogabalus's towering outer wall.

A flash of lightning revealed the figure as he stood in front of one of the two opposing collector's shops set on the road

loop known as Wall's Around. He was wrapped in a slick black cloak, shining with wetness. He had the drape pulled over both his shoulders in the inclement weather, but it was back on his right side enough to show the jeweled hilt of his signature dagger. He wore a flat-topped hat with a tight round brim, quite extraordinary in a land of simple hoods and scarves. Still, that hat paled in comparison to the one worn by the slender figure that drifted past him in the next flash of lightning, a great floppy, wide-brimmed affair, with one side pinned up and a gigantic feather reaching out from it.

"As we thought," the figure whispered as he passed by, neither of them making any movement that would indicate to even a careful observer that they were conversing. "Third on the right."

The slender figure continued on his way, his fine boots clicking loudly on the wet cobblestones.

A moment later, Entreri moved to the doorway of the collector's shop, Tazmikkella's Bag of Silver, and with a look around, slipped inside.

A young couple sat behind one table, giggling and hardly taking notice of him. Across from them, a middle-aged man fidgeted with some small statues, dusting each and grumbling to himself as he replaced them on the shelves. He was plump and as round of face as he was of belly, which was considerable, with apple red cheeks and bright lips. Though his eyes were large, he seemed to be constantly squinting.

"Well, good enough," he said to Entreri. "If you came in to get out of the rain, then you're a smart one, not to doubt. Look around—perhaps you'll even consider purchasing something. Now, there's a thought that few in this town seem to be having! Yes, yes, why buy anything when one can just walk into the shop and ogle it?"

Entreri stared at him, but did not respond, either with words nor any expression.

"As you will, then," the man went on. "Just do please keep your wetness from the new carpets. Someone might want to actually buy one, after all."

Hardly paying the little man any more heed, Entreri moved to the right, as he'd been instructed, to the third candlestick set in the shop's front window. Its base was in the shape of a squatting toad—a most unattractive piece, Entreri thought, though he rarely took the time to consider beauty. He picked up the fourth candlestick first, feigned a quick look over it, then set it down and took the second, then the third. The assassin slid one sensitive finger beneath the base of the candlestick. He felt the variation in texture almost immediately, from silver to wax.

A flash of lightning outside sent his thoughts back to the tavern and the napkin the serving wench had put down on the table. He recalled the verse on that old, dirty rag, and felt the wax again.

"Wickless in the nether," he whispered.

"What's that?" asked the little man.

"I said that I do enjoy the feel of this piece," Entreri lied.

"The storm has ruined my candles. I came only to replace them, but now I find this most interesting candlestick."

"You want to buy that?" asked the merchant, his tone showing that actual sales really weren't a common event.

"Fifty silver pieces?" Entreri asked.

The little man scoffed at him and said, "It's weight alone would take twice that melted down."

"It is pure silver?" Entreri asked, feigning surprise, for of course, he already knew that it was and had already estimated its worth to within a few coppers.

"Nothing but the best," said the little round man as he hopped over. "Fifty gold would be closer to the price than fifty silver."

Entreri moved to replace the candlestick, but stopped just before it went down on the window sill. He stood holding it for a few long moments.

"I will offer thirty gold," he said. "A fair price."

"Fair?" said the shopkeeper. "Why, it cost us forty just to acquire it!"

"Forty, then."

"Forty-two," insisted the little man.

Entreri shrugged and pulled a pouch from his belt. He tossed it up and down in his open palm for a moment or two, then tipped it over and spilled out a few coins. Another toss to test the weight, and he flipped it to the little man.

"Forty-two," he agreed. "Perhaps even forty-three."

Tucking the extra gold into another pouch, the assassin took the candlestick and moved for the door.

"Wait," said the little man. "Is there anything else I might interest you in? You haven't even purchased a candle, I mean, and the night is dark. And did you not come for candles? How fine that candlestick shapes the shadows when a proper light is placed atop it."

Giggling at another table made the little man realize that he was speaking to himself, however, for Entreri was already gone.

Outside, another lightning flash illuminated the street, so bright and prolonged that Entreri could read the sign on the collector's shop opposite: Ilnezhara's Gold Coins.

With a glance each way, Entreri moved off, his boots not making a sound on the wet cobblestones. He had a long way to walk, all the way to the southern section of the city, but he moved swiftly with little foot traffic to hinder him. He arrived at the unremarkable building a short while later, and looked around, as had been his habit for many years, before moving up the back staircase to the second floor and the door to his

apartment. Another look confirmed that he was alone, and he slipped through.

The room was warm and inviting, with a fire blazing in the hearth and candles burning in the many arms of the decorated candelabra that seemed everywhere. Entreri

shrugged off his cloak as he entered and flipped it onto the rack by the door where a similar fine traveling cloak hung, drying. His hat went up next, taking its place before its more sizeable companion.

Entreri wiped the remaining moisture from his face with one arm, while he unfastened his belt with, his other hand. He stopped short, though, and pulled out his jeweled dagger, launching it into an end-over-end flight across the room. It crossed over his small bed and dived into a silhouette he had painted on the wall—a representation of a lithe figure with a ridiculously large hat. As always, the dagger struck true, just a few inches above the bed and right in the groin area of the silhouette.

"Ouch, I suppose," Jarlaxle said.

"At least," said Entreri.

When he looked at his partner, Entreri nearly stepped back in surprise, for Jarlaxle had his eye patch up on his forehead, showing Entreri both his eyes at once for the very first time.

"I do find it rather unsettling," said the drow, "that you would wish something from that region protruding over your bed."

"If I awakened under threat and reached for my dagger, and it was anything other than that hanging over my bed, rest assured I would tear it out."

"Ouch again, I suppose."

"At least."

Jarlaxle laughed at him and asked, "Why the foul mood, my friend?" "Personality trait."

"We deciphered the verse correctly, obviously," said Jarlaxle, motioning for the candlestick Entreri held. " 'Wickless in the nether,' indeed."

Entreri walked toward him, but stopped short and placed the candlestick on the table as he went by.

"And all this time, I thought that remark aimed at your virility," Entreri said as he moved past and fell onto his bed.

"The tavern wench placed the napkin on the table

equidistant to us both," Jarlaxle reminded. He produced the dirty old cloth from a pocket and held it up before Entreri." 'More valuable in practical, a better bargain found,'" he read." 'A careful eye will find the prize in sight of Wall's Around. For pretty things that serve no use, the true art finds its tether. To those who know, illumination comes wickless in the nether.'"

With a sly grin as he finished, the drow mercenary inverted the candlestick and picked at the wax set in its base, in the arse of the squatting toad.

"The second line was key, of course," he said as he popped the plug free. "Silver is more practical than gold, and so our choice of shops was settled." Jarlaxle's smile widened as he dipped his delicate little finger into the cavity and pressed his nail against the side, pulling forth a thin rolled parchment as he retracted the finger. "Our correct choice."

The drow mercenary leaned forward over the table and spread the parchment before him.

"Interesting," he said, and when no response came forth from his roommate, he said it again, and again.

After many frustrating minutes, Jarlaxle said it yet again, then nearly jumped out of his seat when he was answered by Entreri, who was standing right behind him.

"It's a map."

"A map?" the drow asked. "It is a series of dots, a circle, a single line and a drop of blood. How is that a map?"

"The dots are buildings... locations. All the buildings that have played a part in this riddle we have entered," Entreri explained. He leaned forward, indicating each as he named them. "The tavern, our apartment..."

He paused there and glanced around, not pleased to learn that whomever was behind it all knew where they lived.

"And the Wall Around," said Jarlaxle, catching on and pointing to the circle. "Bag of Silver and Gold Coins. Indeed, the proportions of the distances seem fairly accurate." He measured each with his fingers as he spoke, confirming his

guess. "But all of this was known to us already."

"Except for that," said Entreri, pointing to the one mark on the far edge of the long parchment, a drop of blood very far removed from the other indicators.

"Blood?" asked the drow.

"A destination."

The pair found the spot of blood—a rather unremarkable cabin on the side of a rocky hill far outside the wall of Heliogabalus—in the light drizzle of the following morning. The city was not visible from the cabin, for it was on the far side of the hill, nor was it near any roads.

Entreri eyed the abode suspiciously, scanning the surroundings for signs of ambush, but no threat presented itself. The roof was not high—the back side of the house, abutting the hill, rose no more than five feet above the stony ground—and there were no trees close enough to afford any archers an easy shot.

So caught up was the wary assassin in scouting the surrounding area that he was caught somewhat by surprise when a woman's voice addressed the pair right from the small porch of the house.

"Clever and quick," she said. "Better than I expected, really."

The companions took a step away from each other, each sizing up the woman from a different angle. She was not unattractive, though certainly not beautiful. Her face was rather plain, and unadorned with the many powders and colors that had become all the rage in Damara among the women of the court. That face seemed a bit short, too, or perhaps that was because her shoulders seemed too wide for the rest of her frame. She appeared a little older than Entreri, probably nearing, if not already past, her fiftieth birthday. Her thin, shoulder length hair was a soft blend of gray and strawberry blond, though certainly not as lustrous as it once might have appeared.

She wore a modest dress, powder blue and simply tailored. Her shoes were low cut, quite impractical for the muddy,

harsh terrain between the cabin and the city. They were shoes more common within the city gates, Entreri noted, and certainly nothing a hearty hermit so far out of town would wear.

Entreri felt Jarlaxle's gaze upon him, so he turned to take in his friend's smirk.

"Greetings, Lady Tazmikella," the drow said with a great flourish and a deep bow, sweeping his wide brimmed hat off as he bent low.

Entreri, surprised by the remark, looked to the woman, noting her sudden scowl.

"Do you always take such presumptive chances?" she asked, and Entreri couldn't tell if she was annoyed because Jarlaxle had guessed correctly, or insulted because he had so labeled her.

"Deductive reasoning," explained the drow.

The woman didn't seem very impressed, or convinced, when she said, "I have your interest, it would seem, so come inside."

She turned and walked into the cabin, and with another shared look and a pair of concerned shrugs, they moved up side by side, Jarlaxle's enchanted boots clicking loudly even on the soft ground, and Entreri's skilled steps making not a whisper of sound, even on the hard wood of the porch stairs. Inside, they found the facade of the cabin wholly misleading, for the room was spacious—too much so, it seemed—and well-adorned with fabulous tapestries and rugs. Most were stitched with designs depicting the gentler pleasures of life in Damara: a shepherd with his flock on a sunny hillside, a woman singing while cleaning laundry at a stream, a group of children playing at the joust with long poles and the pennants of well-known heroes—Candelabrum and fine, sturdy plates covered the table. Dry sinks lined every wall, full of plants and flowers neatly and tastefully arranged. A chandelier hung over the center table, a simple but

beautiful many-limbed piece that would have been more fitting in one of the mansions of the great city, though not in its more formal rooms.

Looking around at the decor, at the distinctive silver flavor, Entreri realized that Jarlaxle's guess had been correct.

"Please, sit," the woman said.

She motioned to the simple but elegant carved wooden chairs around the central table. It was hardly inexpensive furniture, Entreri noted, as he felt the weight of the chair and let his finger play in the deep grooves of superior craftsmanship.

"You have moved quickly and so you are deserving of similar effort on my part," the woman said.

"You have heard of us and wish to hire us," said Jarlaxle.

"Of course."

"You do not look like one who would wish another killed."

The woman blanched at the drow's suggestion, Entreri noted. For that was Entreri's role whenever they met a new prospective employer and Jarlaxle posed that very same question. Jarlaxle always liked to start such interviews in a blunt manner.

"I was told that you two were skilled in . . . procurement."

"You seem to do well in that area yourself, Lady Taz..." Jarlaxle stopped short, looking for cues.

"Tazmikell!" she confirmed. "And yes, I do, and thank you for noticing. But you may have also noticed that I am not alone in my endeavors in the fine city of Heliogabalus."

"Inezhara's Gold Coins," said Entreri.

"It is a name I cannot speak without an accompanying curse," the woman admitted. "My rival, once my friend. And alas, she has done it again."

"It?" the two asked together.

"Procured a piece for which she is not worthy," said Tazmikella, and when doubting expressions came at her, she sat back in her chair and held up her hands to stop any forthcoming inquiries. "Allow me to explain."

The woman closed her eyes and remained silent for a long while.

"Not so long ago," she began tentatively, as if she wasn't sure if they would get her point, "I happened across a woman sitting on a rock in a field. She did not see me, for she was wrapped in memories. At least, it seemed that way. She was singing, her eyes closed, her mind looking far away—to one she had lost, from what I could tell from the few words I could decipher. Never have I heard such passion and pain in a voice, as if

every note carried her heart and soul. She touched me deeply with the beauty of her art and song.

"For me, there was simple appreciation, but my counterpart —"

"Ilnezhara," Jarlaxle reasoned, and Tazmikella nodded.

"Ilnezhara would never have understood the beauty of that woman's song. She would have cited how the words strained to rhyme, or the lack of proper technique and the occasional warbling in that untrained voice. It was just those imperfect warbles that pulled at my heart."

"Because they were honest," said Jarlaxle.

"And thus practical," added Entreri, bringing it back to the verse that had brought them there.

"Not pretty enough for Ilnezhara, perhaps," Jarlaxle said, building upon the thought. "But the prettiness of perfection would have tethered the honesty of emotion."

"Exactly!" said Tazmikella. "Oh, this is a battle we have long waged. Over everything and anything, it seems. Over painting and sculpture, tapestries, song, and story. I have listened to bards, have watched them sweep away entire common rooms in tales of bold adventure, enrapturing all who would listen. And only to hear Ilnezhara, once my partner, tell me that the structure of the tale was all wrong because it did not follow some formula decided by scholars far removed from those folk in the tavern.

"We battled at auction recently, or we thought to, except

that I held no interest in the painting presented. It was no more than a scribbling of lines that evoked nothing more than simple curiosity in me—the curiosity of how it could be proclaimed as art, you see."

"Your counterpart saw it differently?" asked the drow.

"Not at first, perhaps, but when the artist explained the inner meaning, Ilnezhara's eyes glowed. Never mind that no such meaning could be elicited through viewing the work itself. That did not matter. The piece followed the prescribed form, and so the conclusions of the artist seemed self-evident, after they were fully explained. That is the way with people like her, you see. They exist within their critical sphere of all that is culture, not to appreciate the warble in a wounded woman's song, but to stratify all that is around them, to tighten the limits of that which meets approval and dismiss all that is accessible to the common man."

"They make themselves feel better," Jarlaxle explained to Entreri, who realized that he was either bored or lost.

"So, you would have us steal this painting that you did not want in the first place?" Entreri asked.

Tazmikella scoffed at the notion.

"Hardly! Cut it with your fine sword for all I care. No, there is another piece, a piece Ilnezhara came upon purely by accident, and one which she will never even try to appreciate. No, she keeps it only because she knows it would be precious to me!"

The mercenaries looked at each other.

"A flute," Tazmikella said. "A flute carved of a single piece of gray, dry driftwood. It was fashioned long ago by a wandering monk, Idalia of the Yellow Rose was his name. He took this single piece of ugly, castoff driftwood and worked it with impeccable care, day after day. It became the focus of his very existence. He nearly died of starvation as he tried to complete his wonderful flute. And complete it he did. Oh, and from it came the most beautiful music, notes as clear as the wind through ravines of unspoiled stone."

"And your counterpart got it from this monk?"

"Idalia has been dead for centuries," Tazmikella explained.

"And the flute thought lost. But somehow, she found it."

"Could you not just buy it from her?" asked the drow. "It is not for sale."

"But you said she would not appreciate it."

Again the woman scoffed and said, "She sets it aside, sets it away without a thought to it. It is valuable to her only because of the pain she knows I endure in not having it."

The two mercenaries looked at each other again.

"And not just because I do not have it," Tazmikella went on, somewhat frantically, it seemed. "She knows the pain that I and others of my humor feel because no breath will flow through the work of Idalia. Don't you see? She is reveling in her ability to steal true beauty from the common man."

"I do not—" Entreri began, but Jarlaxle cut him off.

"It is a travesty," the drow said. "One that you wish us to correct."

Tazmikella rose from the table and moved to a drawer in one of the dry sinks, returning a moment later with a small parchment in hand.

"Ilnzhara plans a showing at her place of business," she explained, handing the notice to Jarlaxle.

"The flute is not there," Entreri wondered aloud.

"It is at her personal abode, a singular tower northeast of the city."

"So while Ilnzhara is at her showing, you would have us visit her home?" Jarlaxle asked.

"Or you, you alone, could go to the showing," Tazmikella explained, indicating the drow. "Ilnzhara will find one of your ... beauty, quite interesting. It should not be difficult for you to elicit an invitation to her private home."

Jarlaxle looked at her skeptically.

"Easier than breaking into her tower," Tazmikella explained.

"She is a woman of no small means, rich enough, as am I, to buy the finest of pieces, to hire the most skilled of guards,

and to create the most deadly of constructs."

"Promising," Entreri noted, but though he was being sarcastic with his tone, his eyes glowed at the presented challenge.

"Get that flute," Tazmikella said, turning to face Entreri directly, "and I will reward you beyond your grandest dreams. A hundred bags of silver, perhaps?"

"And if I prefer gold?"

As soon as the words left his mouth and Tazmikella's face went tight with a fierce scowl, the assassin figured he might have crossed over the line. He offered a quick apology in the form of a tip of his hat, then looked at Jarlaxle and nodded his agreement.

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Artemis Entreri never could resist a challenge. He was supposed to hide outside the singular stone tower and await Jarlaxle's appearance beside Ilnezhara, if the drow mercenary could manage an invitation there, as Tazmikella had hinted.

The front of the thirty-foot gray stone tower had a wide awning of polished stone, supported by four delicate white columns, two carved with the likenesses of athletic men, and two with shapely women. The tower door beneath that awning was of heavy wood, carved in its center to resemble a blooming flower—a rose, the assassin thought.

Both the pull ring and the lock were gilded, and Entreri couldn't help but notice the stark contrast between that place and the modest house of Tazmikella.

Entreri knew that the door would be locked and probably set with devilish traps, perhaps even magical wards. He saw no guards around, however, and so he moved under cover of the waning daylight to the side of the tower, then inched his way around. At one point, he noticed the sill of a narrow window about halfway up, and his fingers instinctively felt at the stone blocks. He knew he could climb up, and easily.

Realizing that, he went instead for the door. !

In short order, Entreri found a trap: a pressure plate in front of the handle. Following the logical line to the front left column, he easily disarmed that one. Then he discovered a second: a spring needle set within the lock's tumblers. He took a block of wood from his pouch, an item he had designed precisely for that type of trap. The center was cut out, just enough to allow him to slide his lock-pick through with a bit of play room. He slipped it in, wriggled it a few times, then nodded his satisfaction as he heard the expected thump against the block of wood. Retracting the block, he saw the dart, and saw that it was shiny with poison. Ilnezhara played seriously.

And so Entreri played seriously for the next few moments too, scouring every inch of that door then rechecking. Satisfied that he had removed all of the mechanical traps, at least (for magical ones were much harder to detect), he went to work on the lock.

The door clicked open.

Entreri leaped back, rushing to the column to reset the pressure plate. He moved fast and sprang to the threshold, moving through suddenly and pushing the door closed behind him, thinking to relock it.

But as he bent with his lockpicks to reset the tumblers, the door burst in, forcing him to dive aside.

"Oh, for the love of drow," he cursed, continuing his roll off to the side as the carvings from the columns strode through, slender stone swords in hand.

Out came Charon's Claw, Entreri's deadly sword, his jeweled dagger appearing in his other hand. With little regard for those formidable weapons, the two closest of the stone constructs charged in, side by side. Charon's Claw went out to meet that charge, Entreri snapping the sword left and right to force an opening. He shifted sidelong and rushed ahead, between the stone swords, between the statues, and he managed to snap off a quick slash at one with his sword, and stabbed hard at the other. Both blades bit, and for any

mortal creature, either might have proved a fatal strike. But the constructs had no life energy for Entreri's vampiric dagger to siphon, and no soul for Charon's Claw to melt.

They were not his preferred opponents, Entreri knew, and he lamented that no one seemed to hire flesh and blood guards anymore.

He didn't dwell on it, though, and pressed past the two male statues.

The two females came at Entreri fast and hard, leaping at him and clawing the air with stony fingers.

Entreri hit the floor in a sidelong roll. He got kicked by both, but accepted the heavy hits so that he could send both tumbling forward, off-balance, to smash into their male counterparts. Stone crumbled and dust flew in the heavy collision, and Entreri was fast to his feet, wading in from behind and bashing hard with his powerful sword.

As the statues unwound and turned on him in force, Entreri called upon another of Charon's Claw's tricks, waving the blade in a wide arc and summoning forth a black wall of ash as he did. Behind that optical barrier, the assassin went out to the side, then reversed and charged right back in as the lead statues crashed through the opaque screen.

Again his sword went to work ferociously, chopping at the stone. And again, Entreri waved a wall of clouding ash and rushed away.

In the temporary reprieve, he noted that two of the statues were down and crumbled, and a third, one of the women, was hopping toward him on one leg, its other lying on the floor. Beside it came one of the males, seemingly unscathed. Entreri rushed ahead to meet that charge before the male could get far out in front of the crippled female. In came the stone sword, and Entreri hooked it expertly with his dagger and turned it out, then jerked it back in as he went out, slipping past the male and going low, then cutting across with his sword, taking the remaining leg from the hopping female. She crashed down hard and Entreri came up fast,

planting his foot on her face and springing away just in front of a mighty downward chop from the male's sword.

A downward chop that split the female's head in half.

Entreri hit the ground in a spin and came right back in, one against one. He slipped Charon's Claw inside the blade of the thrusting stone sword, then lifted as he turned to drive the weapon and weapon arm up high. He stepped forward and jabbed his dagger hard into the armpit of the statue, then disengaged Charon's Claw at such an angle that he was able to crack it down across the statue's face as he moved off to the side. The statue turned to pursue, but Entreri was already reversing his direction, moving with perfect balance and sudden speed.

He hit the statue across the face again as he passed, but that was merely the feint, for as the statue threw its sword arm up to block, Entreri turned and rushed under that arm, coming out the other way in perfect balance and position to slam Charon's Claw against the upper arm of the already damaged sword arm.

That arm fell to the floor.

The statue came on, clawing at him with its one hand. Entreri's blades worked in a blur, expertly taking the fingers from the statue's hand one at a time.

Then he whittled the hand to a stump in short order. The statue tried to head butt him, but its head fell to the floor.

"Stubborn rock," Entreri remarked and he lifted his foot up, braced it against the torso, and shoved the lifeless thing away and to the floor.

His weapons went away in the flash of an eye, and he turned to regard the room, taking in the sight of treasure after treasure.

"I'm working for the wrong person," he mumbled, awestricken.

He shrugged and began his search for the driftwood flute of Idalia. Before long, he realized that the destroyed statues were deconstructing, their essence and materials drifting

back out the open door to the columns—as he'd expected they would.

When they were finally back in place outside on the columns, magically repairing as if nothing had happened, Entreri closed and locked the door. Anyone approaching would think all was as it had been, or so he hoped.

As soon as the couple walked through the tower door and he got a good look at the infamous Ilnezhara, Entreri wondered if there might not be more to Tazmikella's antipathy toward her former friend than simple merchant rivalry. For Ilnezhara seemed everything that Tazmikella was not. Her hair hung long and lustrous, and so rich in hue that Entreri couldn't decide if it was reddish-blond or reddish-brown, or even copper-colored, perhaps. Her eyes were blue and big—enormous, actually, but they did not unbalance her bright face. Though her nose was thin and straight, and her cheekbones high and pronounced, her lips were as thick and delicious as any Entreri had ever seen. She was taller than the five-and-a-half foot Jarlaxle by several inches, and moved her slender form with as much grace as the nimble drow.

"I do find you entertaining," she said to the drow, and she tossed her thick hair.

Entreri knew that he was well-hidden, tucked in a cranny partly covered by a tapestry and concealed by a many-armed rack holding bowls of many colors. There was no way that Ilnezhara could see him, but when she tossed her hair and her face flashed his way, he felt the intensity of her gaze upon him.

She went right back to her conversation with Jarlaxle, and Entreri silently scolded himself. When had he ever so questioned his abilities? Had he been taken in by the woman's beauty? He shook the thought away and concentrated on the conversation playing out before him. The couple were seated on a divan then, with Ilnezhara curled up beside the charming drow, her finger delicately

tracing circles on his chest, for she had opened the top two buttons of his fine white shirt. She was speaking of entertainment, still.

"It is my way," Jarlaxle replied. "I have traveled so many of the surface lands, from tavern to tavern and palace to palace, entertaining peasants and kings alike. I find my charms my only defense against the inevitable impressions offered by my black skin."

"With song? Will you sing to me, Jarlaxle?"

"Song, yes, but my talents are more musical."

"With instruments? I have a fine collection, of course."

She pulled herself from the divan and began striding toward the back of the room. There were indeed many instruments back there, Entreri knew, for of course he had searched much of the tower already. Several lutes and a magnificent harp, all of exceeding quality and workmanship graced the back area of this first floor.

"Your wonderful fingers must trace delicate sounds about the strings of a lute," Ilnezhara said—rather lewdly, Entreri thought—as she lifted a lute from a soft case to show to Jarlaxle.

"In truth, it is my kiss," said the drow. Entreri tried not to let his disgusted sigh be heard. "My breath. I favor the flute above all."

"The flute?" echoed Ilnezhara. "Why, indeed, I have one of amazing timbre, though it is not much to view."

Jarlaxle leaned toward her. Entreri held his breath, not even realizing that it all seemed too easy.

Ilnezhara continued toward the back of the room.

"Would you like to see it?" she asked coyly. "Or rather, would you like to see where I keep it?"

Jarlaxle's smile melted into a look of confusion.

"Or are you hoping, perhaps, that your sneaky friend has already found it, and so when I open its case, it will not be there?" the woman went on.

"My lady..."

"He is still here. Why do you not ask him?" Ilnezhara stated, and she turned her gaze over the cranny at the side, staring directly at the hidden Entreri.

"Play with my friends!" Ilnezhara cried suddenly and she lifted her hand and waved it in a circle. Immediately, several statuettes—a pair of gargoyles, a lizard and a bear—began to grow and twist.

"Not more constructs!" Entreri growled, bursting from his concealing cubby.

Jarlaxle sprang from the divan, but Ilnezhara moved with equal speed, slipping behind a screen and running off.

"Well done," Jarlaxle said to Entreri, the two taking up the chase.

Entreri thought to argue that he had defeated every entryway trap, and that he could not have expected Ilnezhara to be so prepared, but he stayed silent, having no real answer to the sarcasm.

Behind the screen, they found a corridor between the racks of artwork and jewelry cases. Up ahead, the woman's form slipped behind yet another delicate, painted screen, and as it was very near to the curving back wall, it seemed as if they had her—and would get to her before the constructs fully animated and caught up to them.

"You have nowhere to run!" Jarlaxle called, but even as he spoke, he and Entreri saw the wall above the screen crack open, a secret door swinging in.

"You didn't find that?" the drow asked.

"I had but a few minutes," Entreri argued, and he went left around the screen as Jarlaxle went right.

Entreri hit the door first, shouldering it in and fully expecting that he would find himself out the back side of the tower. As he pushed through, though, he felt that there was nothing beneath his foot. He grabbed hard at the door, finding a pull ring, and held on, hanging in midair as it continued to swing. As he came around and took in the scene before him, he nearly dropped, as his jaw surely did.

For he was not outside, but in a vast magically-lighted chamber, an extra-dimensional space, it had to be, going on and on beyond Entreri's sight. Having served among the wealthiest merchants in Calimport, and with the richest pashas, Artemis Entreri was no stranger to treasure hoards. But never before in all his

life had he imagined a collection of coins, jewels, and artifacts to rival this! Mounds of gold taller than he lay scattered about the floor, glittering with thousands of jewels sitting on their shining sides. Swords and armor, statues and instruments, bowls and amazing furniture pieces were everywhere, every item showing wonderful craftsmanship and care in design.

Entreri glanced back to see Jarlaxle at the threshold, staring in and appearing equally dumbfounded.

"An illusion," Entreri said.

Jarlaxle shifted his eye patch from one eye to the other and peered intently into the room.

"No, it's not," the drow said, and he glanced back to the tower's entry room.

With a shrug, Jarlaxle casually stepped into the room, dropping the eight feet or so to the floor. Hearing the clatter of the approaching constructs behind him, Entreri let go of the door, swinging it closed as he dropped. It shut with a resounding thud, and the • tumult disappeared.

"It is wonderful, yes?" Ilnezhara asked, stepping out from behind a pile of gold.

"By the gods..." whispered Entreri, and he glanced at his partner.

"I have heard of such treasures, good lady," the drow said.

"But always in the care of—"

"Don't even say it," whispered Entreri, but it didn't matter anyway, for Ilnezhara's features began to shift and scrunch suddenly, accompanied by the sound of cracking bones.

A huge copper-colored tail sprang out behind her, and gigantic wings sprouted from her shoulders.

"A dragon," Entreri remarked. "Another stinking dragon. What game is this with you?" he asked his partner. "You keep placing me in front of stinking dragons! In all my life, I had never even seen a wyrm, and now, beside you, I have come to know them far too well."

"You took me to the first one," Jarlaxle reminded.

"To get rid of that cursed artifact, yes!" Entreri countered.

"You remember, of course. The artifact that had you under a destructive spell? Would I have chosen to go to the lair of a dragon, else?"

"It does not matter," Jarlaxle argued.

"Of course it matters," Entreri spat back. "You keep taking me to stinking dragons."

Ilnezhara's "ahem" shook the ground beneath their feet and drew them from their private argument.

"I could do without the disparaging adjectives, thank you very much," she said to them when she had their attention, her voice sounding very similar to what it had been when she had appeared as a human woman, except that it was multiplied in volume many times over.

"I suspect we need not worry about the constructs coming in to attack us," said Jarlaxle.

The dragon smiled, rows of teeth as long as Entreri's arm gleaming in the magical light.

"You do entertain me, pretty drow," she said. "Though I lament that you are not as wise as I had believed. To try to steal from a dragon at the behest of a fool like Tazmikella? For it was she who sent you, of course. The foolish woman can never understand why I always seem to best her."

"Go," Jarlaxle whispered, and the assassin broke left, while the drow broke right.

But the dragon moved, too, breathing forth.

Entreri cried out and dived into a roll, not knowing what to expect. He felt the wind of dragon breath passing over him, but came back to his feet, apparently unhurt. His elation at

that lasted only a moment, though, until he realized that he was moving much more slowly.

"You cannot win, of course, nor is there any escape," said Ilnezhara. "Tell me, pretty drow, would you have come here to steal from me if you had known of my true identity?"

Entreri looked past the dragon to see Jarlaxle simply standing there, vulnerable, before the great wyrm. His incredulous expression was all the answer Ilnezhara needed.

"I thought not," she said. "You admit defeat, then?" Jarlaxle just shrugged and held his arms out to the side.

"Good, good," said the dragon.

Her bones began to crunch again, and soon she appeared in her human form.

"I did not know that copper dragons were so adept at shape-changing," the drow said, finding his voice.

"I spent many years studying under an archmage," Ilnezhara replied. "The passage of centuries can be quite boring, you understand."

"I do, yes," the drow answered. "Though my friend..."

He swept his arm out toward Entreri.

"Your friend who still thinks he might get behind me and stab me with his puny dagger, or cut off my head with his mighty sword? Indeed, that is a formidable weapon," she said to Entreri. "Would you try it against Ilnezhara?"

The assassin glared at her, but did not answer.

"Or perhaps you would give it to me, in exchange for your lives?"

"Yes, he would," Jarlaxle was quick to answer.

Entreri turned his scowl over his friend, but realized that he really couldn't argue the point.

"Or perhaps," said Ilnezhara, "you would instead agree to perform a service for me. Yes, you seem uniquely qualified for this."

"You need something stolen from Tazmikella," Entreri reasoned.

Ilnezhara scoffed at the notion and said, "What could she

have that would begin to interest me? No, of course not. Kill her."

"Kill her?" Jarlaxle echoed.

"Yes, I grow weary of our facade of a friendship, or friendly rivalry, and I grow impatient. I do not wish to wait the few decades until old age takes her or renders her too infirm to continue her silly games. Kill her and arouse no suspicion from the authorities. If you can do that, then perhaps I will forgive your transgression."

"Perhaps?" asked the drow.

"Perhaps," answered the dragon, and when the two thieves hesitated, she added, "Do you believe that you can find a better deal?"

Entreri watched Tazmikella stiffen when she noticed Jarlaxle sitting casually in a chair in the back of her modest cabin.

"You have the flute of Idalia?" she asked, breathless.

"Hardly," the drow replied. "It would seem that you did not fully inform us regarding the disposition of your rival."

From his hiding spot off to the side, Entreri measured Tazmikella's reaction. He and Jarlaxle had agreed that if the woman knew Ilnezhara's true form, then they would indeed kill her, and without remorse.

"I told you she would be well-protected," Tazmikella started to say, and she stiffened again as a dagger came against her back.

"What are you doing?" she asked. "I hired you honestl—" She paused. "She sent you back here to kill me, didn't she? She offered you gold against my silver."

Entreri hardly heard her question. He hain't even pricked her with his vicious, life-drawing dagger, and yet the enchanted blade had sent such a surge of energy up his arm that the hairs were standing on end. Trembling, confused, the assassin lifted his free hand, placed it against Tazmikella's shoulder, and gave a push.

He might as well have tried to push a mountain. Entreri groaned and retracted both open hand and dagger.

"For the love of an eight-legged demon queen," he muttered as he walked off to the side, shaking his head in disgust. He glanced over at Jarlaxle, who was staring at him curiously.

"Her?" the drow asked.

Entreri nodded.

Tazmikella sighed and said, "My own sister sent you to kill me...."

"Your sister?" asked the drow.

"One dragon's not good enough for you, is it?" Entreri growled at his partner. "Now you've put me in the middle of a feud between two!"

"All that you had to do was steal a simple flute," Tazmikella reminded them.

"From a dragon," said Entreri.

"I thought you quick and clever."

"Better if we had known the power of our enemy."

"And now you have come to kill me," said Tazmikella. "Oh, is there no room for loyalty anymore."

"We weren't going to kill you, actually," said Jarlaxle.

"You would say that now."

"If we found out that you knew you were sending us into the home of a dragon, then yes, we might have killed you," Entreri added.

"You'll note that my friend did not drive the blade into your back," said the drow. "We came to talk, not murder."

"So, now that you are aware of my... disposition, you wish to parlay? Perhaps I can persuade you to go and kill Ilnezhara."

"My good ... lady," the drow said, and he dipped a polite bow. "We prefer not to involve ourselves in such feuds. We are thieves—freely admitted!—but not killers."

"I can think of a drow I wouldn't mind killing right now," said Entreri, and he took some hope, at least, in noticing that Tazmikella smirked with amusement.

"I would suggest that you and your sister sort this out reasonably. Through talk and not battle. Your king carries

Dragonsbane as his surname, does he not? I would doubt that Gareth would be pleased with having his principal city leveled in the fight between a pair of great dragons."

"Yes, dear sister," came another voice, and Entreri groaned again.

Jarlaxle bowed even lower as Ilnezhara stepped into view, as if she had simply materialized out of nowhere.

"I told you they wouldn't try to kill me," Tazmikella replied.

"Only because that one discovered your true identity before he plunged his dagger home," Ilnezhara argued.

"That is not entirely true," said Entreri, but they weren't listening to him.

"I suppose I could not blame them if they did try to kill me," said Tazmikella. "They were instructed to do so by a dragon, after all."

"Self-preservation is a powerful incentive," her sister agreed as she moved next to Jarlaxle.

Ilnezhara reached up and unbuttoned his shirt, and again began tracing lines on his chest with her long finger.

"You wish to play with me before you kill me, then?" Jarlaxle asked her.

"Kill you?" Ilnezhara said with feigned horror. "Pretty drow, why would I ever wish such a thing as that? Oh no, I have plans for you, to be sure, but killing you isn't in them."

She snuggled a bit closer as she spoke, and Jarlaxle grinned, seeming very pleased.

"She's a dragon!" Entreri said, and all three looked at him.

There usually wasn't much emotion in Artemis Entreri's voice, but so heavily weighted were those three words that it hit the others as profoundly as if he had rushed across the room, grabbed Jarlaxle by the collar, lifted him from the ground, and slammed him against the wall, shouting, "Are you mad?" with abandon.

"That one is so unimaginative," Ilnezhara said to her sister.

"He is practical."

"He is boring," Ilnezhara corrected. She smirked at Entreri.

"Tell me, human, as you walk along the muddy trail, do you not wonder what might be inside the gilded coach that passes you by?"

"You're a dragon," said Entreri.

Ilnezhara laughed at him.

"You have no idea what that means," Ilnezhara promised.

She put her arm around Jarlaxle and pulled him close,

"I know that if you squeeze harder, Jarlaxle's intestines will come out of his mouth," Entreri said, stealing Ilnezhara's superior smile.

"He has no imagination," Jarlaxle assured her.

"You are such a peasant," Ilnezhara said to Entreri. "Perhaps you should get better acquainted with my sister."

Entreri rubbed a hand over his face, and looked at Tazmikella, who seemed quite amused by it all.

"Enough of this," Tazmikella declared. "It is settled, then."

"Is it?" Entreri asked.

"You work for us now," Ilnezhara explained. "You do show cleverness and wit, even if that one is without imagination."

"We had to learn, you must understand," added her sister.

"Are we to understand that this whole thing was designed as a test for us?" asked Jarlaxle.

"Dragons—" Entreri muttered.

"Of course," said Ilnezhara.

"Then you two do not wish to battle to the death?"

"Of course not," both sisters said together.

"We wish to increase our hoards," said Tazmikella. "That is where you come in. We have maps that need following, and rumors that need confirming. You will work for us."

"Do not doubt that we will reward you greatly," Ilnezhara purred.

She pulled Jarlaxle closer, drawing an unintentional grunt from him.

"She's a dragon," Entreri said.

"Peasant," Ilnezhara shot back. She laughed again, then pulled Jarlaxle around and released him back toward the

door. "Go now back to your apartment. We will fashion some instructions for you shortly."

"Your discretion is demanded," her sister added.

"Of course," said Jarlaxle, and he bowed low again, sweeping off his feathered hat.

"Oh, and here," said Ilnezhara. She pulled out a plain-looking flute of gray driftwood. "You earned this," she said. She motioned as if to toss it to the drow, but turned and flipped it out to Entreri instead. "Learn it well, peasant—to amuse me, and also because you might find it possessed of a bit of its own magic. Perhaps you will come to better appreciate beauty you cannot yet understand."

Jarlaxle grinned and bowed again, but Entreri just tucked the flute into his belt and headed straight for the door, wanting to get far away while it was still possible. He passed by Tazmikella, thinking to go right out into the night, but she held up her hand and stopped him as completely as if he had walked into a castle wall.

"Discretion," she reminded.

Entreri nodded and slipped aside, then went out into the foggy night, Jarlaxle right behind him.

"It worked out quite well, I think," said the drow, moving up beside him.

Jarlaxle reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder, and in the cover of that shake, the drow's other arm snaked behind his back, reaching out and gently lifting the flute from Entreri's belt.

"Dragons____" Entreri argued.

He shoved Jarlaxle's arm away, and used the cover of the movement to flash his other hand across and secretly take back the flute, even as Jarlaxle set it in his belt.

"Are you so much the peasant, as beautiful Ilnezhara claims?" asked the drow, moving back beside his partner.

"Your imagination, man! Have we ever known wealthier benefactors? Or more alluring?"

"Alluring? They're dragons!"

"Yes, they are," said a smug Jarlaxle, and he seemed quite entranced with that notion.

Of course, that didn't stop him from sliding his hand across to relieve Entreri of the magical flute once more. The drow brought it farther around his back to a waiting loop on his belt—a magical loop that would tighten and resist thieving fingers.

Except that what Jarlaxle thought was the loop was really Entreri's cupped hand and the man wasted no time in bringing the flute back.

Such was the fog in the friendship of thieves.

SERPESTRILLVYTH

Richard Baker

Flamerule, the Year of the Banner

On the hottest day of the summer, Erzimar rode into the dusty town with the Company of the Argent Hawk at his back. A cooper looked up from his work as Erzimar and his companions rode past, clutching an iron hoop in his broad hands. A small knot of women speaking together in the thin shade of a browned oak stopped their gossiping to stare at the travelers.

The half-elf Gethred dismounted with a creak of leather and shrugged his cloak from his shoulder, leaving his sword arm clear. Despite the heat, the handsome swordsman wore a breastplate of gold-chased steel. Sweat and dust grimed his face. He took in the dry, bare ground, and the straw-thatched homes and workshops with a single slow look.

"What's the name of this town again?" he asked.

"Pelldith Lake," answered Isildra. She, too, wore mail and leather, though her surcoat was emblazoned with the sleepless eye of Helm's faith. She drew off her gauntlets to wipe strong hands across her brow, frowning at the dirt around her. "That's what they said in Elturel, anyway."

Erzimar swung himself down from his own mount. Short and wiry, Erzimar did not mind the sweltering summer heat as much as his companions. He was a Shaaran, from the

sweltering cities by the Lake of Steam, with golden-bronze skin and straight black hair. He wore a short, curved scimitar at his belt. But his preferred weapon was the staff of rich mahogany he carried across the saddlebow.

"There's the inn," he said.

"It'll do," Bragor the dwarf said as he lowered himself gingerly to the ground from his sturdy pony. As round and strong as a barrel of oak, the taciturn dwarf didn't like riding much, and liked riding on a hot day even less. "I don't care if this is the right village or not, I'm not going another mile today."

The Vaasan swordsman Murgolm followed suit, sparing one sullen look for the staring townsfolk before shaking the sweat from his long, black hair. Murgolm spoke little Common, but he had some Dwarvish and therefore tended to stay close to Bragor, who translated for him at need.

They led their horses into the inn yard, which was shaded by a line of tall, dusty poplars. A young stable boy with ungainly long arms and legs and a mop of sandy hair hurried out to meet them, blinking in the sunlight. He stood staring at the travelers while Geth-red returned his empty gaze.

"See to our mounts, lad," Gethred called. "Don't let them drink yet, they're hot. Bring in our saddlebags and packs when you're done."

"Yes, sir!"

"Now, lad, where can a fellow find something to wash the dust of the road from his throat?"

"Right through there, sir," the stable boy said. He pointed at the inn's door. "There's a taproom inside." He stared at the travelers again, his face working awkwardly as he struggled with something he wanted to say. Erzimar exchanged glances with his companions as they waited. Bragor turned away with a dour curse, tired of waiting, but then the lad broke free of his paralysis with a small hop and asked in an excited rush, "Are you here about the dragon?"

Erzimar simply nodded at the boy. The stable boy gaped in

amazement as the travelers shook the road dust from their cloaks and went into the warm gloom of the inn's common room. Heavy footsteps sounded on creaking floorboards, and the innkeeper appeared—a short, stout fellow with sweat gleaming on his bald head. His face was sallow, with gray stubble discoloring his jowls and small, quick eyes.

"Good day, travelers," he began. "I am Rothas, the master of this house. How many rooms will you be needing, then?"

"We'll take three," Gethred said. "And we'll take any good ale you've got in your ice cellar, and something to eat, too. The quicker, the better."

"Of course, sir..."

The innkeeper hesitated, in much the same way that the stable boy had.

Erzimar took pity on the fellow and said, "Yes, Rothas, we've come about the dragon."

Two hours later, Erzimar felt almost comfortable again. His thirst was well quenched, he had a good meal under his ribs, and he'd even found half an hour to dunk himself in the cold lake nearby. He sat alongside Gethred, Bragor, Murgolm, and Isildra in five wooden chairs that had been lined up along one wall of the inn's common room. Opposite them sat the half-dozen aldermen of Pelldith Lake. Two dozen more onlookers clustered in the back of the room, silent and watchful.

The aldermen included the innkeeper Rothas, and the cooper Ethern, the fellow Erzimar had seen as he rode into town.

"We're all here, alderman," the wizard said. "Let's hear what you have to say."

The elders looked at each other, and the cooper Ethern stood up. He knotted his strong hands together as he spoke.

"Thank you for answering our call," he began. "When will the rest of your party arrive?"

"We're it," Gethred said with a crooked smile. "The Company of the Argent Hawk, five strong. I am Gethred Hesthell of

Everlund. This is the Vigilant Isildra of the Temple of Helm, Bragor Ironhand, Murgolm Stoyevsk of Vaasa, and Erzimar Dal Tirza of Innarlith, our wizard."

Ethern studied them, rubbing thoughtfully at his long jaw, then asked, "Will five of you be enough?"

"That depends on your dragon," Erzimar replied. "We can't help you if you've got an ancient red to deal with. If that's the case, I would advise you to pack up your belongings and abandon the town." He noted the stricken expressions on the elders' faces, and added, "Anything short of that, we can likely help."

"It's big, but not that big," the cooper said. "Strong, quick, with a heart as black as a rotten tree. A wicked beast."

"And it's damnably clever, too," Rothas muttered.

Erzimar leaned back in his chair and studied the elders. He could see at once that they were scared. Frightened out of their wits, really. No one wanted to meet his eyes. The townsfolk stared at the floorboards or shifted their feet, nervous.

"Listen, Ethern—for what it's worth, we've slain dragons before. We took a black up near the High Moor, and a young but strong red in the Sword Mountains. We know what we're about. Now, tell us the tale from the start."

The cooper looked at his fellow elders, who offered weary shrugs and nods for answers.

He turned back to the Argent Hawks and said, "It started about four tendays ago. We started losing livestock. That's not unusual—trolls raid the outlying homesteads from time to time. But we couldn't find any tracks. It was rainy then, and the pastures muddy. Trolls dragging off cows would have left plenty of footprints.

"Of course, we figured out later that the dragon was taking the livestock on the wing. Anyway, after this had gone on for several nights, we assembled a company of watchmen to guard the pastures. Two dozen archers, in groups of four, plus a few folk who have experience fighting monsters:

Elzur, our town sorcerer; Brother Stort, a cleric of Lathander; and Selran, here—" the cooper nodded at a tall, sandy-haired fellow who stood in the back of the room, staring blankly at the floor—"who's stalked gnolls in the hills."

"Didn't know enough to be scared, yet," Rothas, the innkeeper, said.

"Five nights passed with nothing out of the ordinary," the cooper went on, "and some folks thought that whatever it was had moved on. But on the sixth night... on the sixth night it was the dark of the moon. As best we could make out later, it came against Elzur

and the archers with him, and killed them all with its breath before they even knew it was there. Then it turned on a nearby homestead. Counting Elzur and our watchmen, ten people dead in one night. That's a hard thing in a town the size of Pelldith Lake."

"I can imagine," Erzimar said. "Go on."

The cooper cleared his throat and said, "Well, we knew we had real trouble. We sent for a company of adventurers, a band of sellswords who were exploring some old ruins nearby. They agreed to help us out. The Fellowship of the Sundered Shield, or the Shield Fellows, they called themselves.

"The Shield Fellows searched the countryside for a couple of days—Selran went with 'em, because no one knows the lands nearby better—and they found a dragon's cave in the hills a few miles off. Two tendays ago they set off to go deal with the monster. But none of them came back. The dragon killed them all. Only Selran returned to tell the tale."

Erzimar shifted in his seat, looked up at the straw-haired tracker leaning against the back wall, and asked, "You saw the dragon take them?"

The fellow looked up. His face was streaked with sweat, and his eyes seemed pale and unfocused, as if he looked on distant and terrible things.

"No," Selran managed. "They hired me to serve as a guide to

the area, and to help watch their mounts. I did not enter the cave. The dragon called out to me when it was done. Told me to run back home and carry its demands for tribute." He cast his gaze down to the dusty floorboards again. "Its name is Serpestrillvyth."

"Did you pay its tribute?" Erzimar asked Ethern.

"We tried. We scraped together a thousand gold coins, twenty head of cattle, six casks of good wine—it wasn't easy. Then, when we sent the wagon to the place the dragon had told us to, a band of trolls attacked

and took it all. We think the dragon put them up to it, because the very next day it killed a little boy, and told his father that the town had better come up with another ransom to replace the one the trolls took."

Bragor the dwarf nodded, his beard spilling over his mailed chest, and said, "Aye, that's an old dragonish trick. Steal the ransom you demanded, and get paid twice."

"We argued long and hard over whether or not to pay again. Alderman Torbath argued most vehemently against it. He pointed out that we might as well spend the coin to hire dragonslayers to rid ourselves of the monster."

Erzimar looked at the elders and asked, "I'm sorry, but I don't recall—which one of you is Torbath?"

The cooper looked away and said, "He's not here, sir. He's dead. The dragon crept right into the middle of town one night and killed him in his bed."

"It found out that Torbath was going to be trouble, and it took care of him," the innkeeper said. He coughed awkwardly. "After that, we sent out word that we needed a dragonslayer."

"The dragon seems well informed about the town," Gethred murmured to the wizard in Elvish.

"It's not unexpected," Erzimar replied in the same language.

"It could be a sorcerer of some skill; a lot of dragons are. A few divination spells would easily let it keep an eye on things here. I've warded us against scrying, just in case."

"It could have someone spying for it."

"Or it could have spies, yes. We won't rule out anything yet," Erzimar answered. He turned his attention to the tracker leaning against the back wall, and spoke in Common again.

"Selran, did you see the dragon?"

"I did. Just a glimpse of the monster, as it called out to me from its cave."

"What color was it, and how big? The size of a horse? An oxcart? A house?"

"I'm not sure about the color. It was dark. As far as the size, I would say it was as big as a large draft horse." The tracker looked around the taproom. "It could fit through that door, but not by much. It would pretty much fill this room with its wings and tail and all."

Erzimar nodded. An adult, most likely, but not particularly old and strong, at least as dragons went. Dragons grew throughout their lives, and the really old ones could be tremendously large and powerful. He glanced back to the town's spokesman.

"Have you seen it breathe anything? Fire, acid, lightning?"

"Its breath is a foul, choking, poisonous mist. It can kill everyone in a good-sized farmhouse by blowing its poison in a door or window."

"Those who die from its breath—is their skin eaten away? Puckered and split?"

Ethern paled, but he nodded and said, "Yes, that's the way of it."

"It's a green, then. No doubt about it," Bragor muttered.

He leaned over to Murgolm and explained the conversation to the Vaasan in Dwarvish.

"Can you help us?" Rothas the innkeeper asked.

"Yes," said Erzimar. "It's not to be taken lightly, but we've defeated dragons of that size before. Not a green, but we know what we need to do, I think." He glanced at his companions, searching for dissent and finding none. Then he turned back to the aldermen. "Let's discuss a suitable fee

for slaying your dragon."

They rested in Pelldith Lake for the rest of the day and all of the next. The company armed and provisioned for an expedition to the dragon's lair, and they hired the tracker Selran to show them the way. They rode out into the hills above the town in the brief cool hour just after sunrise. Selran rode in the lead, dressed in a sweat-stained jerkin of leather sewn with iron rings, a long bow of yew across his back.

The day was still and sweltering. A distant line of thunderheads slowly gathered in the hazy west, but the low thunder rumbled throughout the afternoon without ever drawing closer. They climbed over endless thicket-covered ridges and splashed through boggy dells, shallow and scummy after the summer drought.

An hour before dusk Selran led them to a ruined hunter's lodge by a reedy lake.

"We're still five miles from the dragon's cave," the ranger said. "I don't dare bring the horses any closer, or it might sniff them out and find us in the night."

"We'll fortify this place with our spells, just in case," Erzimar replied. "It wouldn't do to let Serpestrillvyth catch us sleeping."

While the mage worked his magic and laid his wards, Gethred and Murgolm tended to the horses, and Bragor saw to the cooking as best he could without lighting a fire. Isildra and Selran stood guard, watching the darkening sky and the warm, still woods. The ranger stood in the shadows of the trees and watched the Argent Hawks at their tasks, his face set in a stony frown.

"What is it, Selran?" Isildra asked. "What troubles you?"

"It is nothing," he said. Then, after a moment, he sighed and sat down on an old stump that had been cut for the lodge.

"It's just that... you're so much like the others."

"The others?" Isildra looked at him blankly for a moment, then she nodded. "Oh. The Fellowship of the Sundered

Shield."

Selran nodded expressionlessly and said, "I brought them to the cave by a different path—it would have been foolish to follow the same trail twice. But this seems just like..." He seemed to struggle with himself, searching for the right words perhaps, then he gave in with an odd shrug. "I fear for you all."

The cleric of Helm nodded and said, "We shall be careful, Selran. Extremely careful."

"The Shield Fellows said the same."

Erzimar returned from setting his magical defenses and joined the conversation with a quick smile. "Yes, but you forget—we have an advantage over the Sundered Shields. We know this dragon has killed a company of dragonslayers. Nothing serves to sharpen one's sense of caution as well as an example like theirs."

Isildra set a hand on Selran's arm and said, "Helm rewards vigilance, Selran. Keep your eyes open, and speak up when something troubles you. We will listen. You know this dragon, you know this terrain. Your intuition may be our best weapon."

The ranger sank down on a stump, elbows on his knees, eyes fixed on the empty woods across the lake.

"I doubt it," he said softly. "It's a damnably clever dragon."

They set a half-on, half-off watch throughout the night, and even those who were not on watch slept with weapons close at hand and mail shirts or breastplates loosely fastened, ready to rise and fight at a moment's notice. But the night passed without danger, though at one point Selran cried out in his sleep and gave them all a bad start.

Afterward, Gethred pulled Erzimar aside, and the two moved a little ways off from the camp. The half-elf kept watch over Erzimar's shoulder, his hand on his sword hilt as he spoke.

"What do you think of the ranger?" he asked softly in Elvish.

"He seems shaky to me" Erzimar admitted. "I don't know

that I can blame him, though. Consider the courage it must take to return to the den of a dragon after you've seen it kill a whole band of heroes."

"More courage than to go the first time, I suppose. Still... I don't think we should count on him, if it comes to that."

Erzimar shrugged and replied, "If he bolts, I don't see the harm in it. My plans do not depend on Selran in any way, shape, or form. I would feel badly for the fellow, though. If he does go, I hope he can find it in his heart to forgive himself later."

Gethred snorted.

"I hope I can find it in mine to forgive, him, too," he said. Gethred looked into the wizard's face, and his eyes were dark and serious. "Don't expect him to help much, Erzimar."

Shortly before sunrise, they left the camp on foot and followed Selran over the nearby ridge. The ranger led them along the wooded hillside for several miles before they began to descend toward a boulder-choked riverbed. The stream was dark and slow in the summer heat, trickling through the dusty rocks. Selran finally called another halt in a dense copse another half mile farther on.

"There," he said in a whisper. "This side, two hundred yards."

Erzimar followed the ranger's gaze and saw the cave—a wide, horizontal gash about man-high but close to thirty feet from side to side. It was low, only a few feet above the dry boulders and bleached snags marking the river's high water mark, but it looked like it sloped upward sharply inside.

"I see it," he said. "This is close enough. Before we go any farther, I must see to our magical protections."

The ranger looked up sharply and asked, "You have spells to protect you?"

"Isildra will use her holy prayers to ward against the dragon's breath and strengthen and fortify us. I will armor us all against its teeth and claws and enchant us with spells of dark-seeing. And I'll lay spells of dragonbane on our

weapons, too."

"Can you turn us invisible?"

"I can, but it won't help much. Dragons see through most such spells with ease." Erzimar looked up at the tall tracker, and lowered his voice. "Now, are you staying here, or do you wish to accompany us inside? I need to know before I begin my spells."

Selran paled. He licked his lips and fixed his eyes on the cave mouth. He visibly shuddered, and passed his hand over his eyes.

I should not have asked, Erzimar chided himself. I have shamed him.

The wizard could only imagine the mortal terror the ranger wrestled with.

"You need not go, Selran," he added quietly. "I would not mind a sentry outside to guard against the dragon circling behind us undetected."

"No," Selran said. "No, I will go."

Gethred, who was standing near, clapped one mailed hand on the ranger's shoulder before turning away to look after his weapons.

Erzimar and Isildra quickly and quietly began their spells and enchantments, while the rest of the company stood guard against any sudden attack. The priestess murmured her sacred words and sprinkled holy water over each of the Argent Hawks, her holy symbol glowing blue with the Vigilant God's power. Erzimar confidently rasped out the words of spell after spell, dusting his companions with pinches of ground diamond and weaving potent abjurations over them. So protected, a swordsman could withstand all but the most powerful blows, and deal terrible wounds with his enchanted blade. When he finished with the last spell, he picked up his staff and gestured at the dragon's lair.

"Quick, but not careless," said the wizard. "The spells will not last forever."

Gethred nodded and set out in the lead, trotting toward the cave in a low crouch. Bragor and Murgolm followed, weapons bared. Then Erzimar and Isildra broke cover and followed, keeping close to the fighters in front of them. Selran loped quietly a few steps behind, his bow strung and an arrow grasped in one hand. They crossed the desiccated streambed easily, and scrambled up toward the dark cave above. Stones scraped and crunched beneath their boots, and Erzimar winced with each one.

It must know we're coming, he thought. Dragons have uncannily keen senses. It'll know we're here.

His stomach twisted at the thought of the dragon waiting on them, but the wizard steeled himself and stayed close to his companions. Ducking below the overhanging rock at the mouth of the cave, the Hawks stole inside, blinking as they went from the sun-bright streambed to the deep shadows of the cave. Erzimar caught a whiff of the dragon's scent—a harsh, acrid smell like a tanner's vat, painful in the nose and throat.

Gethred paused in front of him and pointed to the cave floor with the tip of his sword. Erzimar glanced down and saw at once the dragon's wallow, a broad path through the loose scoria where its belly had smoothed

the rubble as it passed in and out of the cave. It was almost a yard wide. He nodded sharply to the half-elf, and Gethred carefully prowled deeper into the cave, following the twisting tunnel deeper into the hillside.

The passage proved difficult and uneven, climbing up and down sharply, with a V-shaped floor that offered little level footing. A serpentine creature with sharp claws and a flexible body could use the narrow walls and rough rocks for easy footholds, but folk on two feet found it difficult going. Mail jingled and scraped as Erzimar's companions slipped and fumbled their way ahead. Erzimar was especially troubled by the height of the passage—crevice, more accurately—since it angled crookedly thirty feet or more

above them. He caught up to Bragor and tapped the dwarf on the shoulder.

"Tell Murgholm to watch above," he whispered. The dwarf nodded and muttered, "I don't like this. Too easy."

He tapped Murgholm on the shoulder and mumbled something in Vaasan. Murgholm craned his neck back and studied the darkness overhead for a long moment before scrambling after Gedreth. Bragor watched his back.

Another fifty feet farther, and they came to a branching passageway that descended sharply to the left. A thin trickle of water spilled out of the wall on the right and crossed the dragon's passage before splashing down into the darkness. Gethred looked back to Erzimar.

"Which way?" he mouthed quietly.

The wizard pointed forward. The downward passage looked a little small to him; a dragon with Serpestrill-vy th's evident ego would not care to squirm its way into its lair. But he resolved to keep a very careful watch behind the party as they continued on, just in case.

They continued a short distance past the intersection, and Bragor halted and went to one knee, reaching his thick fingers to the stone floor.

"Stone's pitted here. Acid burns," he whispered.

Erzimar leaned close to look over Bragor's shoulder.

"The dragon's breath," he murmured.

His eye fell on an oddly shaped dark lump deep in a crevice in the floor. He prodded it with the end of his staff. Rusty red flakes crumbled away, revealing a small white glint of bone: A human hand in a seared mail gauntlet.

"Damn," Bragor muttered. "Right about here, then."

He looked up, hefting his warhammer.

"Little humans. Your swords are sharp, your spells are strong. Have you come to slay me, then?" a sibilant, oddly high-pitched voice rasped from somewhere overhead.

The Argent Hawks went on guard, blades pointing up, crouching against the stone walls of the passage. Erzimar glimpsed a glimmer of bright green near the top of the crevice, a glint from the dragon's eye.

"We've come to put an end to your depredations here, Serpestrillvyth," Gethred answered. "You can leave now, fly off and never return, and we'll let you go. Otherwise you'll not leave this cave alive."

"You must help me carry off my hoard, then. I cannot fly it away so easily."

"Seeing as your hoard consists of things you've stolen from the people you've murdered, you can leave it right here," said Gethred.

He glanced back at Erzimar and cut his eyes toward the crevice overhead. The wizard caught the message—take the

opportunity to locate the creature as long as it was willing to talk. They all understood that Serpestrillvyth had no intention of leaving; the dragon thought it was toying with them.

"You creep into my house to murder me and take my gold, and you call me a thief?" Serpestrillvyth sounded aggrieved. "If the humans in that little town keep sending brigands and assassins against me, I will have to redouble my efforts to show them the error of their ways. I have dealt with one such band already."

"You'll find us a more formidable challenge than the Sundered Shields," Isildra called up into the cave.

"Indeed. Do you know you are standing exactly where they stood when I killed them all?"

Serpestrillvyth laughed—a strange sound like sandpaper abrading a plank—then the dragon thrust its head down low into the passage and hissed out a tremendous gout of sickly green vapor.

The Hawks cried out and scrambled for cover, so taken aback by the quickness of the attack that their magical protections were momentarily forgotten. Only Erzimar did not allow himself to flinch. Instead he gestured and snapped out a magical word, and hurled a bright stabbing fork of lightning up at the spot where the dragon crouched. He saw the creature twist away from the magical blast, but then the dragon's horrid breath sank down over the company.

Acrid fumes stung his eyes, and thousands of tiny pinpricks danced over his skin—but Isildra's holy protections against the dragon's breath held, and Erzimar endured with little more than a stinging in his eyes and throat, while the very rock around him turned black and flaked to the ground like rotten clay.

"You are warded against acid!" he called to his companions. "Stand your ground!"

Gethred swore in Elvish and said, "I can't reach the damned thing!"

He held his greatsword in a high guard, never taking his eyes from the darkness above. Bragor, crouching nearby, set down his warhammer and unslung a big crossbow from his back, quickly cranking back the bow's arms. The dwarf expertly laid a thick quarrel in the weapon. The dragon hissed in frustration, "Sso. Your magic guardss you from my breath. But I have other weapons, humansss." Erzimar readied his staff, expecting the dragon to drop down on them, but Serpestrillvyth had something else in mind. The dragon shifted across the top of the crevice with a quick writhing of its body, then whirled away and slammed its powerful tail into the fragile limestone above. Stone split with a loud, terrible crack! that staggered the adventurers in the bottom of the dragon's passage. Then a great cascade of rubble thundered down over them.

Erzimar raised his arms to cover his head, feeling jagged boulders and broken stalactites glance from his magically armored flesh. The smaller pieces simply bounced away from him like so much firewood burned completely to ash, seemingly solid but light as a feather. But then a much larger piece of the wall caught him as he straightened up, a blunt stalactite the size of a butter churn. Despite the armoring magic that protected him, the wizard was driven to the ground and knocked breathless. Bright spots danced in his eyes.

That would have killed me if not for the stoneskin spell, he realized.

He shook his head to clear his vision, and looked up at his companions.

Bragor and Isildra were digging themselves out from under loose rubble, floundering to their feet. Gethred; at the head of the band, had actually been in front of the dragon's cave-in, and had avoided the rocky avalanche. Similarly, Selran in the back was out of the way as well. But Murgholm_____

"Help... I... help..Murgholm murmured.

He lay pinned against the wall by a boulder the size of an

ox, gasping out curses in Vaasan. His face was as pale as a sheet, and a dark trickle of blood dribbled from the corner of his mouth. Erzimar's spell guarded him from sharp blows, but the inexorable weight of the boulder simply crushed him.

The wizard took two unsteady steps toward the injured Vaasan before he thought to look for the dragon and see what Serpestrillvyth was doing. He glanced up just as the wyrm descended into the passage above Isildra. With one quick snap of its jaws, it seized the Helmite cleric by the head and shoulder, digging its fangs into her flesh and worrying her from side to side. Isildra screamed—a muffled sound, since her head was inside the dragon's mouth—and struggled, frantically trying to pull herself away.

"Let her go, you fiend!" cried Gethred.

The half-elf leaped in from above and slashed at the dragon with his sword. Black blood splattered from his blade as he sheared away a broad swatch of scales from the side of its neck. Serpestrillvyth hissed in pain and thrashed away. Still clenching Isildra in its teeth, it dug its claws into the soft rock of the passage walls and scrambled back up into its retreat overhead, dragging her out of reach. Gethred leaped up and hacked again, but the dragon was out of reach. Bragor finally found his crossbow again and snapped off a shot at the retreating monster, but the bolt merely punched a small bloodless hole in the membrane of its wing.

Erzimar started to incant a deadly spell of disintegration at the monster, but the dragon had Isildra in its grasp—if he missed by even a finger's width, he might incinerate his own comrade. He cursed and changed his spell to a barrage of fiery orbs, easier to

aim and less dangerous to the cleric if he should miss. Five searing bolts scorched the dragon's lashing tail, and it scrambled up out of sight again.

Gethred howled in wrath, "Erzimar! We have to go after her!"

"I know!" Erzimar snapped back.

Isildra still struggled up above. He could hear her cries. The stonewall enchantment would keep Serpestrillvyth from ripping her to pieces easily, blunting its claws and teeth—but it could still maul her to death slowly. They had to get up there quickly.

He glanced over at Murgholm again. The Vaasan was slumped down over the huge rock, as if he'd decided to simply lay his head down to sleep. Dead or unconscious, it didn't matter. He clearly couldn't help. But just in case he might still be saved, Erzimar quickly barked out the words to a spell that disintegrated the massive rock pinning the swordsman. Murgholm slid nervelessly to the rubble-strewn floor.

I should have thought of that at once! the wizard berated himself.

"Erzimar, quickly!" Gethred shouted.

"Selran, see to Murgholm," Erzimar barked.

The ranger stood unmoving, his face streaked with dust from the cave-in, his eyes wide and blank. The wizard ignored the ranger, fumbled with his belt pouch for a moment, and found a small tube of lacquered wood. He twisted off its top and drew out a scroll.

"One moment," he called to Gethred.

Isildra's screams and the venomous hissing of the dragon still continued overhead, but Erzimar forced the sounds from his consciousness and skillfully and steadily read the spell recorded on the scroll.

"Erzimar!" Gethred cried.

"We can fly!" the wizard shouted. "After the monster, quickly!"

Without waiting for the others, he willed himself into the air, darting up the narrow, twisting crevice to the sound of the fighting above. Gethred followed, a little more awkwardly, as did Bragor, his warhammer in hand. Selran stood unmoving below.

The crevice widened out into the floor of a larger cavern, a broad ledge or gallery with plenty of room for the dragon to spy down on creatures picking their way into its lair along the steep-sided path below. Erzimar whirled, expecting the dragon behind him—but there was Isildra, crumpled awkwardly on the stone floor, her head twisted around over her shoulder in a horrible manner, neck snapped. Yet her screams still echoed through the chamber, and the dragon's hissing rage as well.

A simple illusion.

"Watch out!" Erzimar cried to his companions. "We've been deceived!"

From the shadows of a deep cleft nearby, the dragon's cold, high-pitched voice whispered the words of another arcane spell—a spell of dismissing. Erzimar's magic lingered a heartbeat before unweaving all at once. He yelped, and plummeted back down into the crevice, his flying spell gone. Bragor fell as well, but Gethred was close enough to the edge of the crevice to catch himself on the edge, though his sword went clattering down into the depths.

Erzimar hit the far wall first full upon his back. His skull bounced from the stone, giving him a brief instant of merciful blackness, then he turned over in the air, struck the other wall, half-turned again, and landed badly in the uneven rubble at the bottom of the crevice. His right arm snapped like a twig, pinned between two stones. He screamed.

"Ah, that iss a pleasant ssound," Serpestrillvyth hissed from overhead. The dragon stalked back out

into view over Gethred, who clung with both hands to the edge of the crevice. It ran its long forked tongue over its bloody fangs and moved close to the half-elf warrior. "You are not sso bold now, are you, my friend?"

Gethred glanced down to where his sword gleamed in the passage below. Hanging from the edge, he was completely helpless before the dragon.

"I'll show you bold," he spat.

Gethred let himself drop. The warrior took the first impact well, bending his knees and glancing away from the wall, but his balance was thrown off. He cartwheeled in the air and landed on the uneven floor on his side with a sickening crunch. He grunted once and slid spinning into the awkward V of the crevice bottom, near where Bragor lay motionless.

The sword was a good six feet from his fingertips.

The dragon laughed again, and began to pick its way back down into the lower passage.

"You have courage, warrior. But your rashness has undone you."

Erzimar pushed himself upright with his good arm. His back hurt horribly—likely broken as well—and he found himself staring at a white sliver of bone that stuck out from the side of his boot near his ankle. His head swam, but he could still cast a spell. He looked toward Gethred, and their eyes met in the darkness of the cavern.

"I can't rise, Erzimar," the half-elf whispered. He tried to grope his way toward the sword blade, but groaned and fell back. "Save yourself if you can, my friend. There is no shame in it."

Erzimar held the half-elf's gaze, and nodded. He could teleport—it only took a word—but he could never reach any of the others with his limbs broken. Numb with shock, he saw no other alternative.

"Selran," he gasped. "Come close if you want to live. I can teleport us away from here, but you must take my hand."

He reached out to the ranger.

Serpestrillvyth coiled down into the passageway. Its bright green scales gleamed in the dim light, and its eyes danced with malice. It cocked its head sideways, looking at the tracker.

"Kill the wizard," it said.

Eyes glazed, the ranger raised his bow, drawing the arrow's red fletching back to his ear. Erzimar stared up at Selran in

horror, understanding finally that the ranger was not a coward, was not petrified with fear, but instead was enslaved by the dragon's enchantments, helpless to do anything unless Serpestrillvyth commanded it. Erzimar hesitated for one awful moment before he managed to begin speaking his spell.

"I can't stop it," the ranger sobbed. "Gods help me, I can't!"

His fingers parted, and the bowstring sang.

Erzimar grunted, and looked down at the arrow quivering in his breastbone. A deep hot hurt welled up in the center of his chest, and he reached up to pluck at the arrow, only to find his arm didn't work.

Did Serpestrillvyth dominate him when it took the Sundered Shields? he wondered dully. Or did it enslave him before that even, and use Selran to lead the previous company to their doom?

He tried to speak, to ask the ranger which it was, but soft darkness stole up from the floor and quieted his questions in its empty embrace.

The ranger stood weeping, his bow still clutched in his hand. The dragon hissed softly in pleasure and slowly slithered closer, bringing its great scaled head close to Selran's face.

"Ah, Sselran. Why do you weep? I did this, not you, little archer."

"Kill me," the ranger whispered. "Oh, by all the gods, kill me and have done with it."

"Kill you? When you have proven sso useful to me? No, I think I will renew my enchantmentss. You will sserve me a long time yet."

Serpestrillvyth coiled around the ranger, tracing its claw over Selran's heart.

"Now, go back to Pelldith Lake and tell them how these brave fellowss met such a poor end. Tell them they should ssend for more heroes, more dragonslay-erss, for I will be hungry in a tenday or two."

WAYLAID Thomas M. Reid

Marpenoth, the Year of the Unstrung Harp (1371 DR)

"You can't just go traipsing through Silverymoon Pass by yourself, girl! I don't care what sort of package you have to deliver, or to whom. It's the middle of winter! If an avalanche doesn't kill you, the beasts will! No book is worth all that."

Those words—delivered at Lynaelle Dawn-mantle's back as she had walked out the door of the Silverlode Arms two days previous—had seemed innocuous to the girl. But caught near the summit of the pass in a howling, stinging blizzard, with a huge white dragon rearing above her, Lynaelle realized with sudden clarity just how foolish she had been to ignore the proprietor's admonitions.

She desperately wished she was still sitting in the common room of the Silverlode,

enjoying one of Hostwyn Bramblemark's fine meat-and-mushroom pies. Instead, gaping jaws of icy white descended toward the half-elf wizard from out of the swirling curtain of snow, a massive, tooth-lined cavern of a mouth that very easily could engulf her whole, and was just about to.

Lynaelle wanted to scream, to run, but she could not. She found herself rooted to the spot, stark terror holding her fast. She couldn't breathe. As the fangs neared her head, the girl clenched her eyes shut, trembling and praying to Mystra that the end would be quick.

The stabbing pain of death did not come.

Lynaelle opened one eye and found herself staring at another eye, an orb almost as big as her balled fist and the color of glacial ice. That lone eye regarded her from a mere foot or two away, staring at her with a mixture of curiosity and malevolent eagerness while the winter storm raged all around them. The larger eye was set into a bony face, all shiny blue-white, smooth and glistening, like the frozen skull of a bird with a hooked beak, but with hundreds of icicle-teeth as long as the half-elf's fingers. The head bobbed low at the end of a serpentine neck covered in thick, jagged plates.

A dragon.

Lynaelle's knees lost their strength, and she crumpled into the snow that surrounded her. She realized she was holding her breath and exhaled sharply, then drew one shuddering gasp of air. The act nearly made her pass out, for she caught the scent of the beast's own breath, a cold, chemical odor that made her cough and choke. It reminded her of the distilled goat urine the smith back in Galen's Ford used to use to temper his forge work.

A dragon.

The beast's neck stretched up and away, connecting to a body that loomed high above the girl, indistinct in the swirling haze of snow. Lynaelle could barely make out two broad, leathery wings, bent and ribbed like the bat's, fanning out to either side of the huge monster. Even at five paces away, they were nothing more than a slightly darker shade of gray in the overwhelming white of the snow storm. And still they blotted out all light. They could have easily reached and engulfed the girl where she cowered, still trembling. A dragon!

"You will serve," the beast said, its voice deep and hard-edged, like the sound the glaciers made when they scraped together.

Just hearing the dragon's voice made Lynaelle's heart flutter wildly in her chest, and she cringed at the sound of the words, not understanding them but wanting to flee their harshness. She tried to make herself very small, sinking into the waist-deep snow, thinking only of escape. She thought to hide, to cast a spell to take her away from the dragon.

Terror prevented her from remembering any magic at that moment.

Before Lynaelle could even turn away, a great talon-tipped claw raised up and reached for her, digits extended wide. The girl screamed and flailed, trying to roll over in the drift and scramble away. But the cumbersomeness of her heavy clothes and fur-lined cloak, along with the weight of her

pack and the depth of the snowdrift, impeded her efforts. The huge claw shot forward, enveloping her.

As the claw closed tightly around her, Lynaelle expected to be crushed. But the dragon's death grip did not squeeze her unduly, nor did the talons gouge into her flesh. Nonetheless, the power of the dragon's grasp was undeniable, and the girl knew she was trapped as surely as if she were bound in iron. She found her arms pinned tightly to her sides, her cloak bunched up

awkwardly, half covering her head. She felt the book, the damnable book covered in oilcloth in her pack, poking painfully against her spine. Snow pressed in and packed all around her, also trapped in the dragon's grasp.

Lynaelle sobbed, her wail muffled in the fur of the cloak, and she felt herself lifted from the ground, hoisted into the air easily. She struggled between the desire to peer out and see where the beast was taking her and the terror-filled urge to bury her face and clench her eyes closed, as if that could shut the world out, make the dragon go away.

She felt a sudden lurch, and the air was whistling fiercely against her head, whipping the hood of her cloak off and causing her long, straw-colored hair to lash about. Snow pelted her exposed skin, stinging her face. Curiosity won out for a moment, and she opened her eyes a fraction to see, but there was nothing but an endless swirl of white. She could sense that she was aloft, that the dragon was flying, for there was a rhythmic rolling motion that she equated with the beating of the beast's wings. With the blizzard raging all around her, though, the girl couldn't make out her surroundings, and the wind and ice simply hurt too much.

Lynaelle closed her eyes again in pain and despair as the white dragon carried her away from Silverymoon Pass.

She would not reach Silverymoon, would never enroll at the Lady's College. She would never deliver the book. A gift from her teacher for an old friend in the city, it would instead wind up in some lost place in the mountains, its pages

rotting away alongside her bones.

That thought made Lynaelle sob and struggle desperately for a moment, but the effort was futile, and eventually she gave up, sagging in the dragon's grip.

For what seemed like forever, they flew, Lynaelle's fear dulled somewhat by the rhythmic pumping of the dragon's motion. As the initial shock of her capture faded, she began to consider her predicament, as well as the cryptic words the creature had uttered upon claiming her.

If it meant to eat me, the girl thought hopefully, it would simply have done so.

Unless it intends to save me for later, she added. But what did it mean by "serve?"

The thought that perhaps the dragon intended to keep her as a prisoner crossed the girl's mind, and hope actually rose within her. Whatever awful circumstances would be thrust upon her as a dragon's slave, they were better than dying, and it meant Lynaelle might find a way of escaping. Perhaps she would even be able to put her magic to use.

The notion of inflicting any sort of harm on the wyrm with her limited ability was laughable to Lynaelle, but tricking it was not out of the question. If she got the chance.

The half-elf's thoughts were interrupted as she became aware that the brightness of daylight beyond her shut eyelids, weak though it had been, suddenly and sharply diminished. She also noted that, though she still felt the keen rush of icy air, she was no longer being pelted by flakes of snow.

Lynaelle opened her eyes and nearly screamed again.

The dragon was dropping like a stone through a great shaft of ice, a hole in a glacier that was nearly vertical and just large enough for the dragon to unfurl its wings. Overhead, the dim gray of the sky was a receding circle, while below, the shaft plunged into deeper and deeper darkness.

The great white beast fanned its wings out, drawing up sharply and slowing its descent. Lynaelle was jostled roughly as the beast beat its wings three or four times in

rapid succession and settled onto a solid surface. As it dropped into a crouch, the dragon released the girl from its grasp, sending her tumbling across a floor of cracked and rent ice, covered by a dusting of snow. She wound up sprawled on her back, staring upward, the book pressing painfully into her from beneath.

Some light shone down through the shaft, and permeated the area with an eerie bluish glow. It was ample illumination for Lynaelle to see that she was in a large domed chamber, a hollow bubble in a great glacier of ice. The shaft through which she and the dragon had descended opened through the ceiling of the chamber, near one side. The rounded walls of the domed room were slightly uneven, like a drawn curtain, though still smooth and solid like glass. There would be no climbing those surfaces, at least not without tools or magical aid. Only the floor seemed the least bit rough and uneven.

The chamber was an effective prison.

"You will serve me," the dragon said, its harsh, crunching voice reverberating through the chamber.

Lynaelle's attention was drawn instantly back to the beast, which loomed over her, its wings folded in against its body for the moment. Unlike before, out in the weather, she could see the dragon clearly then. It peered down at the girl, its fang-filled jaws open slightly in an unsettling way as it regarded her. Muscles rippled along its chest and flanks, chorded and strong, yet shielded by plates that overlapped all along the surface of the beast. Its body must have stretched a good twenty feet, ending in a tail equally as long and segmented. It reminded Lynaelle of the tail of a beast called a crocodile, pictures of which Ambriel had once shown her.

Lynaelle realized she was shivering from her wind-blasted ride and from lying on the icy floor of the chamber, so she sat up and drew her cloak around herself more tightly, staring fearfully at the dragon.

"Serve you?" she asked, startled by the timidity of her voice. Unlike the dragon's, which had echoed loudly in the domed room, her own speech was hollow and faint. In a way, the girl was surprised she could speak at all.

"Yes," the dragon replied, settling on its haunches and craning its neck down so that its head hovered closer to its captive.

Lynaelle cringed involuntarily.

"I am Torixileos, Master of the Blizzard, Bringer of Icy Agony, and Lord of the Frozen Mountain," the dragon said, his cold and pungent breath washing over Lynaelle and making her flinch away. "You will help me, or I shall devour you!" he roared, making the floor rattle and causing Lynaelle to quake in terror and curl up into a ball. She brought her hands up over her head as she cowered, as though to placate or fend off the beast. Torixileos darted forward, bringing his head down close to Lynaelle and sniffing at her. "You would make a sorry meal," he said, his icicle-teeth mere inches from the girl's face, "but perhaps you will cure nicely if I froze you."

"No!" Lynaelle pleaded, flinching away and wrapping her arms more tightly around her head. "Please don't! I will serve you!"

She could feel tears running down her face as she lost all composure.

I don't want to die, she thought desperately, miserably. Please, she silently begged. Ambriel, come find me.

The dragon laughed, a great, thundering roar that shook the whole icy cavern and made the floor beneath

Lynaelle rumble. She screamed and tried to scramble away. But in her panic she could get very little traction on the slippery surface and only succeeded in slipping and sliding a couple of feet.

"Very wise, little morsel," Torixileos said, quieting. "You may serve me well. And if you do, then I might free you."

At such an offer of hope, Lynaelle stopped frantically trying to escape and turned back to face the dragon, abasing

herself before it.

"Yes," she said, ashamed of her own cowardice but unable to find any courage under the gaze of the terrible beast. "I will do whatever you say. Tell me."

She hated how eager she was to please the dragon, but Lynaelle knew she would do anything, anything at all, to convince him not to eat her.

"I am yours to command," she added, shame making her voice waver.

"Then stand up," Torixileos ordered.

When Lynaelle slowly, carefully managed to get to her feet, the dragon swung his head toward one wall of the domed chamber and said, "Go through there."

For the first time, Lynaelle noticed a tunnel set into the icy wall, though she could see why it had escaped her notice before. It was partially shielded from her view because of the way it opened into the room, angled away from her and behind a lip of ice that jutted out on the near side. She began to make her way toward the opening, taking short, tentative steps. Her whole body was weak with terror, and she feared losing her footing on the slick floor as well. As she walked carefully across the open room toward the exit, Torixileos followed her with his head, giving Lynaelle shivers down her spine. Then the dragon began to pad after her, each of his steps a tremendous thump upon the glacial floor. Lynaelle had to use every ounce of her willpower to fight the urge to run.

The half-elf followed the passage out of the domed cavern. It sloped gently downward and bent around to the right, then back to the left. As a result, she could not see where it was leading, though the dim light filtering through the ice from outside was bright enough for her exceptional eyesight to view everything clearly enough.

Finally, Lynaelle rounded the last bend in the passageway and came upon another large chamber, though it was more irregularly shaped than the previous cavern. It was clear to

the half-elf that the room was actually ice-rimed stone, a shallow cave chiseled out of the mountain itself. Only the area surrounding the passage in which she stood, as well as a smaller section opposite and to her right, consisted of massive sheets of ice, more of the great floe that covered the mountain. The condition of the second chamber was more uneven, with numerous small shelves and ledges along the periphery, and jagged stone and rubble strewn across the floor. A handful of other holes and openings pierced the walls and ceiling, varying in size, distance, and angle.

The girl realized after a second glance that the other ice wall seemed different somehow. In addition to letting in more light than could be found anywhere else in the glacier, it had an unusual look to it, as though it wasn't part of the floe.

It's newer, Lynaelle decided. The ice is cleaner, fresher.

Lynaelle didn't realize she'd stopped moving until she felt Torixileos' icy breath on the back of her neck. Suppressing a shudder, she quickly stepped to one side to allow the dragon to enter. It was only then that she realized the white wyrm had been forced to crawl through

the passage, snaking along on its belly with his wings furled tightly against his flanks. Once he was through the narrow tunnel and fully into the stone chamber, the dragon rose up again to his full height and peered down at the girl expectantly.

Lynaelle backed away from the creature until she felt the cold hardness of a wall pressing against her, stopping her. She waited there timorously for the beast to give her some indication of what he wanted from her.

"I have sealed the entrance," Torixileos said, nudging his nose in the direction of the fresh ice. "You cannot escape."

Dumbly, Lynaelle nodded, realizing at last why the ice looked so different. The dragon had created a barrier to seal her inside.

"There is now only one way out, and you cannot fly, little

morsel. I can keep you here forever."

With those words, Torixileos bent his head back around to stare balefully right at the girl.

Lynaelle slid down the wall she had pressed herself against, feeling panic rising in her gut again. She began to shake her head, and opened her mouth to protest, but the dragon continued on.

"If you help me get my treasure back, I will let you live. Perhaps I will even take you back outside and set you free. But only if you obey. Will you be good, little morsel?"

Lynaelle found herself nodding emphatically, even as she flinched at the nickname the dragon had chosen to bestow upon her.

"Yes, sir," she said without thinking. "I will be good and help you."

"Yes," Torixileos said, bobbing his own head up and down, mimicking Lynaelle's eager nodding. "Help me get my treasure."

"But how?" the girl asked, confused and curious at the same time. "Where is your treasure?"

"Come here!" the dragon said, perhaps more loudly than he'd intended.

The whole room vibrated and shook with those words, and Lynaelle cringed again. Fearful that she might anger the beast if she didn't react promptly, Lynaelle scrambled to her feet and followed Torixileos's head as it swiveled around and he began to nuzzle with his nose the opening to a small tunnel on the opposite side of the room. She approached the small egress, which sat about chest-high to her, and waited for the dragon to move aside so she could peer in.

"I caught a thief trying to steal my treasure. I hurt it, but it escaped in there. I am too big to follow. You must bring them back to me."

Lynaelle recoiled from the small opening upon hearing that she and the dragon were not alone.

"A thief?" she exclaimed, afraid. "How did it-?"

She snapped her mouth shut when she realized that Torixileos was glaring at her.

"You will bring the thief and my treasure to me!" the dragon said loudly, bringing his head down level with Lynaelle's and staring at her directly. "You cannot escape, so you must do as I say!"

Again, Lynaelle found herself nodding, desperately trying to appease the fearsome beast before her. Whatever was in the hole, it could not be as dangerous as the angry white wyrm in front of her. She eyed the opening, which was large enough for her to traverse while walking, if she hunched over a bit. It was dark in the passage, and she could not see very far into it at all.

"What kind of thief is it?" she asked, deeming it prudent to learn as much as she could about whatever she was going to have to face before she actually went into the tunnel.

"A nasty ore!" Torixileos roared at her, blasting her off her feet with his chilling breath.

Lynaelle flailed her arms in front of her face, coughing and wheezing as the icy vapors chilled her skin and stung her lungs. She coughed and spit as she rolled over to her knees.

"Please," she begged, waving an arm to ward off further blasts. "I can't breathe!"

"You can see the thief from here," the dragon continued, ignoring Lynaelle's pleas. "It is wounded, not moving. Drag it back here so that I may eat it."

Lynaelle struggled to her feet again and moved to peer once more inside the passage, casting one fearful glance at Torixileos as she did so. The dragon was staring into the tunnel with one eye narrowed to a hateful slit. The girl stared into the darkness, but of course she could see nothing down the tunnel.

"It's very dark," the half-elf said carefully, then quickly added, "I will need some light to see by," before the dragon could misinterpret her words as a refusal.

Torixileos merely stared at Lynaelle, as though he could not

comprehend what she was trying to say.

"I have no light," the dragon said at last. "Perhaps you are not such a good helper at all, and I should just eat you and find another."

"Wait!" Lynaelle said frantically, backing away and waving her hands in front of herself. "I can make light!"

The girl had not wanted to give up her secret, that she had magical ability, for she feared it would make the dragon suspicious and more wary of her, limiting her chance to escape. But she had no choice, she realized, and yanked off a glove to begin digging through an inner pocket.

She pulled out a tiny bit of moss, which glowed softly, giving off a pale green hue. Then, after slipping her glove back on, she placed the moss in the palm of her hand and began to cast a spell with it.

Just as quickly as she had begun, Lynaelle stopped again, realizing that Torixileos was rearing back from her, drawing in a deep breath. The half-elf went stark still, not daring to move, as the white wyrm stood poised over her, watching her intently. The dragon appeared ready to blast Lynaelle with his breath, but he did not.

"I do not like wizards," Torixileos said at last, eyes narrowing. "They are tricky and use their magic to try to hurt me." Then he bent low and cocked his head so that one eye was level with Lynaelle's face. His next words were delivered very slowly and deliberately. "I have eaten many wizards."

Lynaelle swallowed hard and nodded very gently, her heart pounding in her chest.

She eased her hands down to her sides and said, "I was only going to make some magical light. So I can see to get your treasure back for you." When the dragon didn't move, she felt panic rising again. "I want to be a good helper," the girl said, trying desperately to sound enthusiastic, "so you will be pleased with me."

Torixileos drew his head back.

"Yes," the creature said, his voice low. "My treasure. Go and

get it now. Make your light, little-morsel, but do not try any tricks, or I will eat you."

Lynaelle nodded vigorously again and moved toward the opening.

"I promise," she said.

The girl very slowly and deliberately repositioned the moss in the palm of her hand and began to cast her spell. She mumbled a simple arcane phrase under her breath, nearly tongue-tied by words that at any other time she could have delivered with practiced ease.

Don't often have to cast with a dragon threatening to eat you, she thought as she finished the spell.

The pale green glow of moss transformed into a brighter white glow, like that of a torch, emanating from the glove on Lynaelle's hand. She held it there for a moment, fearful that the dragon might devour her despite her obedience, but when the beast simply blinked in the glow of the magical light, Lynaelle breathed a heavy sigh of relief. Then she turned her attention back to the passage.

Grabbing onto the side of the tunnel, she pulled herself up and stood just inside the opening. With her glowing glove thrust out in front of her, Lynaelle peered deeper into the depths of the passage.

The glitter of many sparkling things shone back at her, and she gasped softly.

The tunnel was not long, perhaps ten paces, and it opened into another chamber, that one also rimed in ice, at the far end. The brilliant shine of coins, jewels, and precious works of art reflected Lynaelle's light.

As Torixileos had promised, an ore lay at the far end of the tunnel, near where the passage opened into the treasure chamber. The creature was sprawled out on its stomach, facing away from Lynaelle. It wore thick fur like armor wrapped around its torso and limbs, kept snug against its body with tied straps of leather. Its back rose and fell softly with each breath. It was alive, but not moving.

Lynaelle wasn't sure whether to draw her dagger or use magic to kill the thing. She hesitated to move closer, unsure of the ore's condition.

"Drag it here so that I may eat it, then bring me my treasure," Torixileos said from behind her. "Now."

Shivering in apprehension, Lynaelle felt trapped between the dangers both behind and in front of her.

The dragon was by far the more terrifying threat, though, so she began to creep closer to the ore, her dagger held defensively in front of herself. She had never been very good with it, carrying the weapon only because Ambriel had insisted she have something else with which to defend herself when magic wasn't an option. Still, her fingers twitched with the desire to let loose with her spells, to sling a magical missile at the ore from a safe distance.

"Stop wasting time," the dragon growled, his voice reverberating down the passage. "I want my treasure!"

Lynaelle jumped at the sound, nearly cracking her head on the roof of the tunnel. The ore groaned softly, making her freeze in her tracks.

"Why can't you just breathe on it and kill it from there?" she asked timidly, cocking her head slightly to one side without taking her eyes off the humanoid. "Then I can get your treasure much more easily."

"Because it cannot—because I do not wish it!" the dragon roared, his chilling breath wafting over Lynaelle's back and making her jump again. "Now obey me, or I shall eat you! Hurry!"

Shaking her head miserably, Lynaelle took another tentative step closer to the ore. She clutched the dagger in a death grip, and she could see the blade trembling from her own fear. Then she took another step, and another. She was within two paces of the ore. She took a deep breath and steeled herself to lunge down for the killing blow, planning to grab the creature by its unruly green hair and yank her dagger sharply across its throat.

As she braced herself and prayed to Mystra for the courage to follow through, Lynaelle took another look at the treasure just beyond the ore, stalling.

What she saw amazed her. True to every tale of dragons the girl had ever heard, riches were scattered in every corner of the chamber. Coins spilled out of overflowing chests and formed huge, ice-caked piles all across the floor. Gems and jewelry sparkled everywhere, embedded in thick blocks of the frozen stuff. And everywhere that Lynaelle looked, artifacts of gold, silver, and adamantite were scattered, many of them coated in a crystal-clear sheen. Everything glinted in the light of Lynaelle's spell, sparkling and shining brightly. Even the chests, coated as they were in thick layers of ice, reflected the girl's illumination.

A low growl from behind her snapped Lynaelle out of her brief distraction, and she knew she could hesitate no longer. She took a final step toward the ore, her dagger still thrust out threateningly. When nothing happened, she nudged the ore with the toe of her boot.

The creature groaned softly and stirred.

"Stop it," the ore mumbled softly, barely loud enough for the girl to hear.

Startled, Lynaelle retreated a step, holding her dagger in front of herself with both hands.

"Kill it now, before it wakes up!" Torixileos roared from the far end.

Lynaelle glanced back toward the entrance to the tunnel and saw one of the dragon's forelegs shoved down the passage, its claws extended, grasping for her. She yelped in alarm and darted forward, terrified of being impaled on one of the deadly talons. In her haste, the half-elf stumbled over one of the ore's legs and went sprawling, landing next to the creature in a heap. Her gloved hand—the one with the magical light still emanating from it—hit the floor of the tunnel right next to the ore's face.

The glare of her spell made it flinch back, and it opened one eye to look at her. The other, she saw, was swollen shut. A gash across its forehead leaked dark blood.

Lynaelle shrieked once and jerked her hand away, scrambling on hands and knees to get beyond the ore. Abject terror lent her speed, but not grace. She slipped and skidded along the frozen floor, barely making any headway. Behind the girl, the dragon's claw withdrew, replaced by the glaring eye of the beast again. As the ore lifted its head and peered around groggily, Lynaelle moved herself into a seated position with her feet closest to the ore's head. She raised one booted foot, aiming it at the humanoid's face, ready to kick it unconscious again.

"Yes," Torixileos gloated, watching. "Bring the thief to me! Shove it to me so that I may eat it!"

Lynaelle drew her foot back, prepared to pummel the ore, her heart thudding sharply in her chest. Terror was giving her strength. She thought she might just drive the ore down the tunnel to the waiting dragon with one powerful kick.

"Wait," the ore said weakly, looking at her with its one good eye. "I'm not the thief."

Lynaelle froze.

At the far end of the tunnel, Torixileos roared in fury and began to reach in with his clawed foreleg once more.

"What?" the girl said, taken aback.

"The... white," the ore panted, barely able to keep its head up, "... is the thief. My treasure... not his."

The ore sagged down again, unconscious once more. Lynaelle sat back, stunned.

How? she thought. So much treasure has to belong to a dragon. Then a realization hit the girl.

The ice.

Seeing that Torixileos had withdrawn his claws once more and that she didn't have much time, Lynaelle stood awkwardly and took hold of the ore by its collar.

She could hear the dragon drawing in a deep breath, and

terror of what she knew was to come drove her.

Dragging the humanoid along the floor, thankful for the slick coating of ice there, Lynaelle scrambled desperately into the treasure chamber. Slipping and sliding, she pulled her counterpart around the corner of the tunnel, out of the direct line of fire, and lay down next to it, against the wall.

As the first arctic blast of the dragon's deadly breath came roaring down the tunnel, Lynaelle took hold of the ore and pulled it atop herself, shielding her body as best as she could from the chilling waves of cold. When the unconscious form was protecting her as much as possible, the girl buried her face in her cloak, hiding away from the frigid tempest that erupted in the cavern.

Even with the ore shielding her, Lynaelle thought she would freeze to death right then and there. Numbing cold washed over her, making her skin and bones ache. She groaned from the pain, her sound muffled by the cloak she wore. Finally, after a moment, the worst of the chill subsided, and she began to listen.

At first, there was nothing but the sound of the ore's breathing. Then she heard the dragon speak.

"Little morsel?"

Lynaelle held very still, holding her breath.

"Little morsel, I know you're in there. I can smell you. Come out, or I will breathe again."

Lynaelle was about to shout, "No!" at the dragon, to tell him to go away, but another sound from beyond the treasure chamber stopped her. It was another voice.

"Torixileos! You would dare?"

The voice was different than the white dragon's, but no less powerful. Smooth and warm like honey, it gave Lynaelle a sudden sense of comfort, like Ambriel's voice used to do.

Torixileos roared again, much louder than ever before, but the dragon's anger was dwarfed by a second roar. The two sounds together threatened to shake the mountain apart, and Lynaelle had to cover her ears with her hands to keep

from crying out in anguish. The girl felt several intense thumps, felt the stone floor of the chamber beneath her bounce, and there was silence.

She waited a long time before crawling out from beneath the ore.

Very carefully, the girl examined the creature she had rescued from the white dragon, then she took off her pack and dug inside it until she found a small vial. Propping the ore's head into her lap, Lynaelle unstopped the vial and poured a little of the contents into the creature's mouth. It coughed and spluttered a bit, but swallowed most of the potion. Lynaelle carefully administered the rest of the healing draught, making sure nothing spilled.

After a few moments, the ore opened its eyes—both eyes, for the swelling had reduced considerably—and looked at her.

"Hello," the ore said. "Who are you?"

"I'm Lynaelle. Who are you? You're no ore, that's for sure."

The ore smiled.

"True enough," it said, sitting up and standing. "My name is Starglimmer."

Then, right before Lynaelle's eyes, the ore began to change. Its form shifted, bulged, grew larger yet sleeker. Its features transformed into a reptilian face, all shiny in the girl's magical light. The change had taken only a few heartbeats, but where the ore had stood previously, a silvery dragon, not much taller than Lynaelle herself, held himself proudly.

"Do I have you to thank for saving me from Torixileos and protecting my treasure?" the silver asked,

his voice a slightly higher and softer version of the mysterious tones Lynaelle had heard challenging the white.

"I did nothing," Lynaelle said softly, shyly. "Only tried to save myself. Something else seems to have arrived and chased the white dragon away. I heard a second voice."

"That would be Mother," Starglimmer said, "coming to check on me. Torixileos wouldn't stick around if she's here. Come on," the dragon added, moving toward the tunnel.

Lynaelle followed the creature, too overwhelmed to speak. Out beyond the tunnel leading to the treasure, the main chamber was empty, and as the pair moved toward the domed room with the ice shaft, a great form, larger even than Torixileos, dropped through the ceiling and landed elegantly.

"Mother!" Starglimmer said, rushing toward the much larger dragon, a silver that gleamed like a finely tempered blade in the eerie blue glow. "What happened?"

"Torixileos won't be bothering you ever again," the larger dragon said, and it was, indeed, the honeyed voice Lynaelle had heard before. The sound made the girl want to cry with joy, so comforting it was. "What happened?"

"Torixileos was here when I returned from a jaunt," Starglimmer said. "I had been out hunting with the ores, hoping to catch wind of any raids they were planning. He caught me by surprise, and I barely managed to slip into a place too small for him to follow before I passed out."

"You should be more careful," the larger dragon admonished.

"You're only barely old enough to be out on your own."

"I know," Starglimmer replied, and Lynaelle could hear embarrassment in the tone of his voice.

"Now," the mother said, looking down at Lynaelle, "Who is this?"

Lynaelle blushed as both of the wyrms regarded her.

"I'm Lynaelle Dawnmantle, a humble wizard on her way to Silverymoon."

"Then you are just as foolish as my son, here," the huge silver said. "No one should be using the pass this time of year, especially not young girls unescorted. How did you end up in here?"

"I was captured by Torixileos and brought here to help him recover 'his' treasure." When the larger dragon cocked her head sideways at that last comment, Lynaelle hurriedly added, "He told me that Starglimmer was actually an ore thief, but I didn't believe him."

"And how did you know, Lynaelle Dawnmantle?" the massive dragon asked, her voice rumbling, though it sounded to the girl as though there was appreciation in the creature's words. "How did you figure out that he was not what he seemed?"

"Just a guess, really," the half-elf replied. "No ore planning to thief a dragon's treasure would haul the entire hoard deeper into the tunnels and freeze it there. But I didn't realize that Starglimmer wasn't really an ore until I began to wonder why Torixileos needed me to help him kill it. Why didn't the dragon just blast it with his icy breath? Once the 'ore' told me that Torixileos was actually the thief, I began to understand—that treasure definitely belongs to a dragon, not an ore.

"I remembered my teacher, Ambriel, telling me once that silver dragons often take on the form of humans and other people to interact with them. And like white dragons, silvers are at home in the cold. The cold can't hurt you, and you very easily could have protected your treasure by freezing it. An ore couldn't survive Torixileos' breath, but a silver dragon disguised as one could. I figured it out just in time."

"Very clever, little Lynaelle," the larger dragon said, seeming to smile. "And if this Ambriel you speak of is who I think he is, then he would know the truth of the matter about silvers."

Lynaelle's eyes widened slightly and she asked, "You know my teacher?"

"I believe I do. We were friends once, many years ago. We studied magic together at the Lady's College, where I still spend time, interacting with the students and teachers. I have not seen Ambriel in a long time. When next you see him, you must tell him that Symarra Brightmoon sends greetings."

In a very quiet, awestruck voice, Lynaelle swallowed and said, "I have a book for you, a gift from Ambriel."

STANDARD DELVING _PROCEDURE

Lisa Smedman

7 Eleint, the Year of Wild Magic (1372 DR)

Frivaldi strode up to the door. It was massive, made of solid iron, its hinges bolted into the rough stone wall of the tunnel. Its handle was a simple lever. The keyhole under it was shield-shaped. Under the rust that mottled the door's surface, he could see a raised symbol: a curved hunting horn with a six-pointed star above and below it.

"You were right," he called back over his shoulder. "It's the Sign of the Realm, just where you said it would be."

Durin, several paces behind in the darkened tunnel, grunted.

"Oh come on,' Durin," Frivaldi exclaimed. "You've got to be just a little bit excited. Nobody's been through this door in more than seven thousand years. We'll be the first dwarves to set foot in Torunn's Forge since it fell to the goblins. Smile a little!" "We're not inside yet."

Frivaldi wagged his fingers and said, "Easy as splitting slate. I've yet to meet a lock that was my match."

"You, who became a Delver just eight months ago. This is only your second delve."

"My third," Frivaldi corrected.

"If it was your one hundred and third delve, it might impress me."

Frivaldi shrugged off the snide comment. Durin never lost an opportunity to remind him how young he was—probably because Durin was so old. The veteran Delver was a hundred and ninety-seven, well past his prime. His weathered face had a diagonal scar that carved a valley through his eyebrow, nose, and cheek, and the joints of his fingers were knobby with age. His hair—what remained of it—was steel-gray. His beard, which hung in a single braid tossed over one shoulder with its tip dragging on the ground behind him, was as white as quartz.

Frivaldi's beard, as dark and curly as lichen, had sprouted

only the year before. He'd been a late bloomer, celebrating his coming of age at twenty-seven—two years later than most dwarves. He didn't appreciate being reminded of that fact.

He flipped his long, unruly hair out of his eyes and turned back to the door. He squatted and blew dust out of the lock—and blinked furiously as it stung his eyes. Ignoring Durin's chuckle, Frivaldi twisted the magical ring on the forefinger of his right hand, causing a prong to spring from the plain iron band. He inserted it in the lock.

Durin interrupted with a cough.

"What?" Frivaldi asked, irritated.

Closing his eyes, he probed the lock's interior with the prong and located its first pin.

"Standard delving procedure for doors," Durin said, "is 'LLOST: Listen, LOk, Search for Traps.' You looked, but did not listen."

"For what?" Frivaldi twisted the prong but the pin didn't shift. Seven thousand years of rust had frozen the lock's workings. "This door's a palm's width thick, at least. There could be a dragon on the other side and I wouldn't hear it."

"Nor did you search for traps," Durin continued.

"It's been thousands of years," Frivaldi muttered. "Any traps are going to be frozen with rust."

He could hear Durin moving away, retreating around the bend of the tunnel. Standard delving procedure, Durin called it, backing it up with a quote from the Delver's Tome: "When facing a potential danger, one member of the delving pair should remain in a position of safety, thus ensuring that a report can be delivered to the Order in case of calamity." But Frivaldi suspected the exaggerated caution was rooted in Durin's age. The longer the beard, the more fearful a dwarf became of tripping over it.

Frivaldi felt the rust holding the pin give a little, and gave the prong a sharp wrench. The prong bent. Cursing, he retracted it back into his ring. From around the corner, Durin

continued to scold. "There may be a ward. When I delved the Halls of Haunghdannar..."

The door bore no glyph. Even through its mottling of rust Frivaldi could see that much. As Durin droned on, Frivaldi rose to his feet, rolling his eyes. Durin was agonizingly tedious—especially when he got on to one of his stories about the delves of decades gone by and the artifacts he'd carried home to Brightmantle's temple, described right down to the last boring detail. For Frivaldi, delving wasn't so much about the

artifact—surely the dwarves had enough magical axes already—as the challenges faced along the way. That lock, for example—the centuries of rust that had frozen its pins in place would have defeated even the most experienced rogue. But where finesse had failed, brute magic could hammer a way through.

He rapped his ring against the door and said, "01-burakrinr. The lock clicked and the door slammed open with a boom that rattled the floor under Frivaldi's boots, releasing a gust of stale air. Beyond the door was a staircase leading down into darkness. Its stairs were cut from the native rock, worn smooth by the feet of centuries-dead dwarves. Grinning, Frivaldi took a step across the threshold—

And something metal clanged onto the floor behind him. A heavy object slammed into his back, knocking him headlong down the stairs. Frivaldi scrabbled for a grip, trying to halt his tumble, but his head slammed against stone. Sparks exploded across his vision, then all went black.

Durin thumbed the cork out of the vial, parted Frivaldi's lips, and poured a dose of healing potion into the unconscious dwarf's mouth. The smell of honey, herbs, and troll's blood lingered in the air as Frivaldi sputtered, then swallowed. His eyes fluttered and he groaned.

Durin touched the egg-sized lump on Frivaldi's head and felt it slowly sink away as the potion took effect. He clucked his tongue, resisting the urge to scold. The boy would either

learn from the experience and be a little more cautious around trapped doors, or not.

Most likely not.

"What... what happened?" Frivaldi asked, sitting up. his voice echoing in the cavernous space.

"There was a pendulum trap at the top of the stairs," he told Frivaldi. "Had you followed standard—"

"So it knocked me down the stairs and I bumped my head," Frivaldi said. "So what? I'm good as new, thanks to the healing potion."

"The pendulum was an axe," Durin continued. "Through luck alone, the wood had shrunk and the loosened blade fell off before it struck you. That axe might have cleaved you in two—killed you—and all because you didn't follow standard delving procedure."

Instead of looking properly contrite, Frivaldi rolled his eyes.

"I know," he said. "LOST."

"L-LOST," Durin corrected. "Listen, LLook—"

Frivaldi rubbed his head and finished for him, "—and Spring the Trap."

Durin sighed. Could he teach his apprentice nothing? He recorked the vial and tucked it back into a side pouch of his Delver's pack, then unbuckled the main flap. Reaching inside the magical pack, he pictured the object he was searching for and felt it nudge his hand. He drew out the map he'd assembled through decades of research and carefully unrolled it. The chamber they stood in was large, extending beyond the limits of his darkvision, and had an arched roof high enough to accommodate a giant. Its floor, once polished, had been cracked by some long-ago earth tremor. Skeletons in rotted leather armor lay on the floor where they had fallen—skeletons with grossly elongated arms and wide jawbones set with small, sharp fangs. These were the goblins that had overrun the kingdom of Oghrann and the stronghold of Torunn the Bold.

Frivaldi clambered to his feet and looked around.

His eye settled on the statues that stood on either side of the staircase.

"Are those supposed to be Moradin?" he asked. "They look like they were hacked out with an axe."

Durin bristled. Frivaldi knew nothing about art.

"They are hewn in a style distinctive of ancient Oghrann," he patiently explained. "Do you see the sharp angles of their foreheads, noses, and chins?"

Frivaldi nodded, but his attention was wandering.

"They are meant to resemble the facets of a gem," Durin explained as he strode over to the nearest statue and ran a hand along the stone.

The surface was precise and smooth, not a chip or a mischisel on it. If he'd had a block and tackle and a team of ponies, he would have gladly hauled the statues away. They would have made a fine addition, indeed, to the athenaeum in Silverymoon.

"The arms, legs, and fingers deliberately hexagonal, like rock crystals," Durin continued. "These statues are an exquisite example of their type, a metaphor in stone for the creation of the dwarf race, which Moradin crafted from precious metals and gems cut from the heart of the—"

"So is this the hall we were looking for?" Frivaldi interrupted. He nudged one of the skeletons with his boot. Its skull collapsed, and a rusted helmet clattered to the floor. "I don't see any axe. Lots of goblin swords and maces, but no axe."

Durin sighed. What, by the gleam in Brightmantle's eye, were the Delvers using as selection criteria these days?

"This," Durin concluded, "must be All-Father's Hall. The Bane of Caeruleus lies to the southwest, in the Hall of Hammers."

He paced a straight line across the hall, which turned out to be precisely forty paces wide. Reaching

the wall, he turned right—standard delving procedure was ERROR: Enter Right, Return Opposite Right-making a circuit of the octagonal hall. As he walked, he quoted from *The Fall of the Bold*, a saga he'd spent decades piecing together from

fragments: inscriptions on standing stones and feast bowls, dusty parchments long forgotten on library shelves, and bardic song.

"And when the Hall of Hammers fell,

"Bold Torunn heard his own death knell.

"The Bane ofCaeruleus he had wrought,

"Abandoned lay, 'twas all for naught."

Frivaldi trotted behind him, scuffling and scattering skeletons.

"I don't see any dwarf bodies," Frivaldi said.

"The dwarves carried out their dead," Durin replied. "It was an orderly retreat."

Spotting a crack in the wall that ran square to the floor, Durin examined it according to procedure. FAIL: Feel Air, Inspect, and Listen. He wet a finger and held it to the crack. No air was escaping. He ran a palm against the floor, but found no groove that would indicate that feet had worn away the stone. He gave the wall a sequence of sharp raps with his delving pick, but heard no telltale reverberations. The crack was a natural fissure leading a short distance into the wall, not a secret door.

Frivaldi, all the while, stared idly around. "So why didn't they take the axe with them?"

" 'Weapon,'" Durin corrected as he resumed his circuit of the hall. He passed the staircase. "The precise translation from Auld Dethek is 'weapon.'"

Frivaldi waved a hand and said, "Axe, weapon-whatever. Why didn't they take it with them, if it was so valuable?"

"The Bane was too large," Durin explained. "Only Torunn could wield it."

He paused. A portion of the wall was angled slightly off true. It was time for MISS: Manipulate, Inspect, Slide, Shove. He pressed a raised spot on the wall next to it, but nothing happened. The section of wall didn't slide when he pressed his palms to it and pushed up, then down, then left, then right. Nor did it rotate open under a sharp nudge from his

shoulder.

Frivaldi, all the while, continued to be idle. He could, at least, have leant his shoulder to the shove. Instead he persisted with his foolish speculations.

"Torunn led the shield band that broke through the goblin ranks. Why didn't he use the axe against the goblins?"

Durin sighed and continued his circuit of the hall. Frivaldi obviously hadn't been paying attention the night Durin had recited the saga for him. Verses one thousand three hundred and fifty-six through one thousand three hundred and seventy-four clearly stated the purpose of the magical weapon Torunn had forged—to slay a blue dragon that had been troubling the realm for nearly a century: the dragon *Caeruleus*. The magical weapon would enable Torunn to fight the dragon "claw for claw," according to the poetic language of the saga. Its wielder would be immune to the blue dragon's primary attack—the bolt of lighting it spat from its mouth—and to the aura of fear that preceded the beast like a shadow. Against goblins, however, the Bane would be no more effective than an ordinary weapon.

Since his map had proved accurate, it was all Durin could do to keep his emotions in check. His lip had twitched at least twice, threatening to pull his mouth into a smile—he straightened it into its usual grim line.

If he did succumb to idle mirth, however, he'd have good cause. After decades of searches in the Stormhorn

Mountains, he'd at last found Torunn's Forge. He was certain of it. Recovering the Bane of *Caeruleus* would be greatest thing he had ever accomplished in his long career. No Delver had ever brought back a weapon of its type. Oh, to think what the order's battle clerics would learn from it. The lost secrets of Oghrann metalsmith-ing would be returned to the light.

Too bad he'd been saddled with a fool like Frivaldi. Durin should have kept his mouth shut when the order asked who would mentor a new member. Durin had pictured an

apprentice who would hang avidly on his every word, who would learn. That was hardly the case with Frivaldi. The boy had a precocious talent for opening locks, it was true, but in truth, Durin would be better off searching for the Bane of Caeruleus on his own. Instead he was stuck with a boy whose beard wasn't even long enough to braid.

Realizing he'd reached the point where he'd begun his circuit, Durin halted and consulted his map. Had he missed something? He glanced back along the wall he'd just walked. Nothing. Just bare wall. All-Father's Hall was one of the main entrances to Torunn's Forge, yet the chamber had no exit other than the stairs. There could be only one conclusion: It wasn't All-Father's Hall. He hadn't found Torunn's Forge, after all. His head bowed and his beard slipped from his shoulder, onto the floor.

Frivaldi peered over Durin's shoulder.

He stabbed a finger at the map and said, "We're here, right?"

Durin jerked the map away and slowly rolled it up.

"I thought so," he said. "But I was..."

He couldn't bring himself to say it.

"And that rune at the end of the line leading southwest from All-Father's Hall..." Frivaldi continued. "It's Auld Dethek for 'hammer,' right?"

Durin grunted. He hadn't realized Frivaldi could read Auld Dethek.

Frivaldi peered around, stroking his pitiful excuse for a beard.

"Then the exit's got to be... there!"

He pointed toward the crack Durin had thoroughly examined earlier.

Durin shook his head.

"It's solid stone," he said. "Standard delving procedure revealed no exit."

Frivaldi snorted and replied, "Standard delving procedure doesn't allow for imagination. All of those stupid

acronyms...."

Durin's fists clenched. He'd written the chapter on acronyms for the Delver's Tome. Belatedly, he realized he'd just crumpled his map.

Frivaldi tossed his head, flicking his hair back out of his eyes. The habit was an annoying one. It reminded Durin of an impatient pony he'd once ridden. The gods-cursed animal had bolted off with both his tent and bedroll.

"Here's a new acronym for you," Frivaldi said. "R-A-S-H." Durin scowled.

Frivaldi winked and said, "Run At SHadows."

Whirling, Frivaldi charged straight at the cracked wall. Durin winced, waiting for the thud of a body hitting stone that would signal the boy knocking himself unconscious a second time.

The sound of running footsteps abruptly stopped.

Durin turned. Frivaldi was gone.

"By my brow," Durin muttered. "It's an illusion."

Tossing his beard over his shoulder, he strode through the wall.

Frivaldi waited, bored, while Durin inspected the corridor on his hands and knees, peering at the floor. If he remembered correctly, the procedure was called CREEP, and had something to do with crouching and examining the floor every so many paces. Eleven, he supposed. That would be the second "E." It seemed silly to Frivaldi. The trigger for any trap was just as likely to be on the second pace, or the seventh, or the twelfth.

With his own dagger, he scratched at the wall beside him, carving his name into a mural fashioned from a natural vein of silver in the rock. In the centuries to come, when other Delvers explored the Forge, they'd see it and know that Frivaldi Loder had been there first.

Durin rose, tossed his beard over his shoulder, and counted off another eleven paces, then dropped once more to his knees for what must have been the hundredth time.

Frivaldi sighed. If he'd been in charge of the delve, they would have been exploring all of the tantalizing side passages and doors they'd seen since leaving the hall with the hacked-up statues. Like the one they'd just passed, for example. Similar to the door at the top of the stairs, it also had a shield-shaped lock. The door probably led somewhere important, but Durin had passed it by.

Frivaldi wagged his fingers. An apprentice was supposed to practice. Wasn't he?

This time, he thought, I'll know what to watch out for.

Walking back to the door, Frivaldi listened—nothing, looked—nothing again, and searched—no sign of a trap. Just in case there was a trap, he crouched to one side of the door as he extracted the prong from his ring and inserted it into the lock. The pins slid aside with only a minimum of effort.

Frivaldi twisted his ring

closed and flipped back his hair. He eased the door open a crack, half expecting a pendulum axe to swing out of the ceiling at any moment. None did.

He gave the door a shove. It stuck, hung up on something. He shoved harder, putting his shoulder into it. Something dragged across the floor—which, Frivaldi noticed, was discolored with what looked like dried blood.

Maybe he wasn't the first Delver to go that way.

He peered around the door and saw a body, long since dead. It was one of the oddest looking creatures he'd had ever seen. Taller and heavier than a human, it had leathery wings and a mane of thick, matted hair. Its face was elongated—it had a snout rather than a mouth—and its jaw was studded with bony scales. A stubby horn jutted out from behind each pointed ear. The thing wore a motley collection of clothing: a torn cloak, leather pants that had split at the seams, and boots with the toes cut away to reveal long, curved toes that ended in talons. Around its neck was a leather thong that was threaded through three rings. The body wasn't as old as the goblin corpses. Judging by the lingering smell it had

died only a few months ago, maybe a year at most. There were a dozen or more dagger-blade-sized punctures in its flesh. The creature had probably triggered some sort of trap. The room was square and small, no more than two or three paces wide. Against the rear wall was a pile of coins that had spilled from a rotted wooden chest. The place must once have been a treasury. At the edge of the pile was a round blue gem—a sapphire shaped like a hen's egg. One side of it—the one tilted away from Frivaldi—was carved with an Auld Dethek rune, but he couldn't read it from where he stood. He crouched and reached for the gem.

"Don't touch it!"

Frivaldi leaped to his feet and exclaimed, "Durin! You startled me."

The older dwarf grabbed Frivaldi by the arm and yanked him out of the room.

"Never—ever—wander off on your own like that again."

Frivaldi shook off Durin's hand and said, "What's that? More standard delving procedure?"

"No," Durin growled. "Just common bloody sense. We're here to find the Bane of Caeruleus, not fill our pockets with gold."

"I wasn't-"

"Yes you were. I saw you reaching for those coins. If you'd touched them, you'd have gotten a nasty surprise."

"What do you mean?"

"Watch."

Durin fished a large copper coin out of his pocket and tossed it onto the pile. Dozens of the gold "coins" sprouted legs and scurried sluggishly about, filling the room with a metallic clinking sound. After a few moments they stilled, retracting their legs.

Frivaldi was intrigued by the tiny creatures. He'd never seen anything like them.

"What are they?" he asked, leaning into the room.

"Hoard beetles," Durin said. "They burrow into the flesh and head straight for the vitals. A swarm can take a man down in

the time it takes to blink. They can lie dormant for centuries, waiting for something warm-blooded to touch them."

"Oh." Durin eased back out of the room. "So that's what killed him."

"Who?"

"Scaly face. The guy behind the door."

Durin unfastened the flap of one of the long, narrow pouches that hung from his belt—they contained his delving tools—and pulled from it a small silver mirror mounted on a short length of segmented rod. Cautiously, keeping one eye on the pile of coins, he extended the rod and used it to peer around the door. He grunted, nodded to himself, then collapsed the mirror rod and put it back in its pouch.

"Are you going to tell me what kind of creature that is?" Frivaldi asked. "Or do I have to look it up in the Delver's Tome?"

Durin gave him a sour look, but said, "It's a dragonkin." .

"What's that?"

"They're like dragons, but not as smart, or as powerful. No breath weapon, no spells—but they can tear open your guts with a single swipe of their talons and they know how to use weapons. They're drawn to anything that's magic. They can't resist it, any more than a crow can forego something shiny. They'll pick a place clean of magic, even though they don't know how to use it." He paused, nodding to himself.

"So that's what made the scratches on the floor. Dragonkin."

"Are the rings magical?" Frivaldi asked.

"Let's find out."

Durin opened a second equipment pouch and pulled out a rod with a hooked blade at one end and a pincher-grip at the other. Extending it, he used the bladed end to slice through the thong around the dragonkin's neck, then reversed it and used the spring-loaded pinchers to recover the rings, one by one. He put the first two inside his pack, but held the last one up for Frivaldi to inspect. It was a band of solid hematite, set with a shield-shaped diamond.

"This one's a stoneskin. If the dragonkin had been wearing it, the beetles couldn't have penetrated its flesh."

"And the sapphire?" Frivaldi asked, eyeing it. "I suppose it's the most valuable bit of magic of all—and the dragonkin was too stupid to know what it was."

"Sapphire?" Durin snorted. "That's a blue spinel, not a sapphire. Any beardless boy could tell you that."

Frivaldi's face flushed.

"And it's nothing but a magical bauble," Durin continued.

"The dwarves of Oghrann handed them out as favors at their feasts. I've found hundreds. I've stopped • picking them up."

"What do they do?"

Durin's lips actually twitched. A smile? He collapsed his pincher-grip rod and put it away in its pouch.

"Look it up in the Delver's Tome when we get back to Silverymoon," he said. "Volume sixteen, chapter four, entry number eight hundred and nine."

Frivaldi glanced at the gem and wagged his fingers. Why should he wait until they got back to Silvery-moon, when he could find out here and now? With the speed of a releasing trap, he lunged into the room and plucked the gem from the pile of coins before the horde beetles could swarm his hand.

"There," he said, turning to Durin. "Now I can start my own collec—"

Something strange had happened to his darkvision. The corridor was no longer black and gray—it had turned blue. No, his skin had turned blue. It was glowing with an eerie blue light that also emanated from his clothes, his hair, even his dagger and pack. Startled, he flung the gem into the air.

"It's just faerie fire," Durin answered. "Touching the rune triggered the spell."

"I knew that," Frivaldi said. He flipped the falling gem back into the air with his foot and bounced it off an elbow for good measure, then caught it, trying to appear nonchalant.

"My, uh... nephew... will love it."

He shrugged off his backpack and opened its main flap,

savoring the smell of new leather that rose from it, and dropped the gem inside.

Durin, examining the door, said, "Did you pick this lock?"

"Of course." Frivaldi wagged his fingers. "Easy as—"

"Then how did the dragonkin get in?"

"It, uh..." Frivaldi shrugged. "It teleported?"

Durin stared at the floor, muttering to himself, "By. the scatter of the coins... yes. There."

He slipped the hematite ring onto his finger, then stepped into the room. Hoard beetles skittered off the pile of coins and threw themselves at his feet and legs, slashing holes in his trousers and boots. They bounced off his skin and clattered to the floor. Durin ignored them.

"What are you doing?" Frivaldi asked.

The glow of the faerie fire was starting to lessen. He could almost see normally again.

Durin examined a section of the rear wall. He pressed his palms against the stone and pushed. With a squeal of rusted pivots and a low grumble, a door-sized section of wall rotated open, revealing a corridor.

"Standard delving procedure," Durin said. "STOP: Secret Transits Ought to be Perused."

He braced his shoulder against the door, which seemed to be straining to shut itself again, and fiddled with the ring on his finger.

Waiting.

Suddenly Frivaldi understood. It was a test of his abilities. A challenge—just like picking a lock.

He eyed the pile of coins. The hoard beetles that had been flinging themselves at Durin had given up and crawled back to their fellows, but several were still moving restlessly on the pile. And the pile was directly in front of the rotating door. He glanced at the

dragonkin corpse—at the dozens of coin-sized lacerations in its flesh—then back at Durin, who was still twisting the ring on his finger.

Frivaldi grinned, took a deep breath, and sprinted for the door. One step, two—the horde beetles skittered off the pile, swarming toward him—then he leaped. He hurtled past Durin, knocking him down. Behind them, the door sprang shut with a scraping thud. Something metallic rolled across the floor: the stoneskin ring.

Durin shoved Frivaldi off and said, "By Moradin's beard, boy, must you always be so impatient?" He scooped up the ring and shoved it into a pocket. "It was stuck on my finger."

Frivaldi picked himself up.

"You were going to toss the ring to me?" the younger dwarf asked. "I thought..."

Durin met his gaze and said, "What? That I was unwilling to take a calculated risk that the horde beetles wouldn't attack me a second time, in order to see an apprentice safely through a dangerous spot?" He tossed his beard over his shoulder. "You don't know me very well, boy."

Durin took off his backpack and pulled from it an iron rod as long as his forearm. One end was wrapped in worn leather, like the grip of a frequently used sword. The other end had a small knob shaped like the face of a hound.

"What is it?" Frivaldi asked.

"Something that will tell us if there are dragonkin ahead."

Frivaldi dredged up the acronym: "FLEE, right? Flank, Locate, Eradicate Enemies. We're going to make sure the dragonkin don't steal up behind us."

The faerie fire had at last worn off, and he could see Durin's face clearly.

"Not quite," Durin said, his eyes glittering like mica.

"The stronger the dweomer, the more dragonkin feel its pull. They're drawn to artifacts like a hoard beetle to warm flesh. If we find other dragonkin..."

Frivaldi grinned and finished, "We find the Bane of Caeruleus."

The rod quivered in Durin's hand, indicating hostile creatures ahead. Pressing a finger to his lips, he made a

stern motion, indicating that Frivaldi should remain where he was, then he crept forward along the corridor. It opened, just ahead, onto a gallery that ran along one side of a large hall. From below Durin could hear the sound of half a dozen to a dozen guttural voices. He recognized the language as Draconian by its hisses and clicks, but the voices were pitched too low for him to make out the words.

The low wall of the gallery had been carved in a pattern as delicate as lace. Sadly, it had suffered. Large pieces had been smashed out of it and a rusted spearhead was wedged in it. Creeping forward, Durin peered down through what remained.

What he saw in the hall below made his eyes widen. He'd half expected the clutch of eight dragonkin, but the figure they were kneeling in front of sent a chill through him. A dragon! And not just any dragon. The monster was just at the edges of Durin's darkvision, but even so he could see the frilled ears and a single, forked horn jutting out of its forehead that were the distinctive traits of a blue.

Had *Caeruleus* survived, all those centuries?

No, a blue might live two thousand years, but not seven. The dragon below must have been one of *Caer-uleus*'s descendants. What a bitter irony—that it had chosen *Torunn's Forge* as its lair.

The dragon was crouched, unmoving, at the center of the great hall. Standing, it would have been as tall as the gallery. It must have been fully thirty paces long from snout to tail tip. The dragonkin seemed puny in comparison. They groveled next to it, snouts to the ground and wings folded, as if worshipping it. The dragon was oblivious to them. It seemed to be sleeping.

Durin glanced around the chamber. It was the Hall of Hammers—that much was clear by the pillars that had been carved into the walls, each topped with a stylized hammer head. At the left end of the hall was the massive forge that had given *Torunn's* stronghold its name. In front of it was an

anvil the size of a feast table and a waist-deep hole in the floor that once would have held water for quenching. The wall to the right was rough, unfinished stone.

Durin peered around the hall, searching for the Bane of Caeruleus. According to the saga, it had been newly forged and imbued with magic when the goblin attack came. Even after seven thousand years it still should have been polished and bright. But the only weapons Durin could see were ancient and rusted. Some were dwarven great axes and urgoshes, some were cruder goblin weapons, but none was the Bane of Caeruleus.

Had the dragonkin simply carried the Bane away?

No, Durin didn't think so. Judging by the fouling of the floor, the dragonkin had made the Hall of Hammers their home for several months—though strangely, the air smelled fresh. There was even a tang of rain-fresh rock in the air. Perhaps it was some magical effect, designed to waft away the soot and smoke of the forge.

The answer to the riddle came a moment later, when a ninth dragonkin seemingly emerged from solid stone, wings flapping. The rough stone wall was an illusion.

Durin tensed as the dragonkin wheeled once around the gallery, but the creature didn't appear to have seen him. It landed next to its fellows on the floor with a scrape of talons on stone, then crouched, folding its leathery wings against its back.

Something brushed against his foot, startling him. Turning his head—he would make no sudden moves that would alert the creatures below—Durin saw that Frivaldi had disobeyed him once again. The boy had crawled forward and was staring, goggle-eyed, at the scene below.

"Is that—"

Durin slapped a hand against the young dwarf's mouth, staunching the whisper.

Once the boy was quiet, Durin returned his attention to the hall below. The dragonkin were rising to their feet. Five of

the nine unfolded their wings and launched themselves at the illusionary wall, disappearing through it. The remaining four seemed to be holding a conversation—one that turned ugly a moment later when one of the dragonkin yanked something out of another's hand. A shoving match ensued and the object—a wand—clattered to the floor. The other two dragonkin both dived for it at the same time, tugging the wand back and forth between them.

Belatedly, Durin realized Frivaldi had started crawling along the gallery toward the staircase that led below. Durin smacked his forehead. By Moradin's beard, why had he been saddled with such an idiot? The dragonkin would probably leave once their quarrel concluded—didn't Frivaldi have even a thimbleful of patience? Standard delving procedure dictated precisely the steps to take, when faced with superior numbers: SWAT: Sit and Wait for Appropriate Time.

Furious, Durin crawled after the boy and yanked him back.

Frivaldi slipped, his hands going out from under him. His shoulder slammed against the rail, dislodging a chunk of it. For the space of one heartbeat, two, Durin held his breath. Then he heard the clatter of it landing below.

As one, the four dragonkin whipped their heads around to stare at the spot on the floor. Then, slowly, they looked up. One of them pointed at the spot where Frivaldi and Durin were hiding. It let out a chattering hiss, and launched itself into the air. The other three leaped after it.

"Run!" Durin yelled, scrambling to his feet.

"Right!" Frivaldi shouted, yanking the leather sheath off the blade of his axe. "'Retaliate Until Neutralized'."

"Not RUN," Durin said, exasperated. "Run!"

Frivaldi turned and grunted, "Huh?"

A dragonkin slammed into him from behind, knocking him down.

Cursing, Durin thrust a hand into his pocket. Before he could get the stoneskin ring onto his finger, however, one of the dragonkin raked his shoulder with its talons, spinning him

around. Gasping at the fierce pain of the furrows that had just been torn in his flesh, Durin fell to his knees, blood flowing from his shoulder. Something tugged at his backpack—and his arms were wrenched backward as the pack was ripped off his back.

The dragonkin were gone.

So was Frivaldi.

Staggering to his feet, Durin looked wildly around. The dragonkin were wheeling through the air above the dragon, first one grabbing the pack, and another, their shrill roars filling the hall. Frivaldi lay on the floor below, his Delver's pack hanging from his shoulder by one strap. The dragonkin must have plucked

him from the gallery and dropped him. He was still conscious—he rose, unsteadily, to his knees, holding his head.

"Frivaldi!" Durin shouted. "Get away from the dragon before it wakes."

Frivaldi either didn't hear him over the racket the dragonkin were making, or was still groggy from being dropped. He managed to clamber to his feet, but then staggered. He slapped a hand against the side of the dragon, steadying himself. Then he peered closely at its scales and did something that made Durin's mouth gape.

He knocked on the dragon's head.

Overwhelmed by the boy's stupidity, Durin nearly abandoned him then and there. Standard delving procedure called for him to cut his losses and retreat; the location of Torunn's Forge was far more important than a single Delver's life. It would be painful, after all of the decades that had culminated in at last finding the Hall of Hammers, to turn back, but Durin could return again with a new partner. A more experienced one. The order wouldn't fault him if—

"Hey Durin!" Frivaldi shouted. "I've found it. I've found the Bane of Caeruleus!"

Durin winced. The four dragonkin, still playing their winged game of snatch-the-stone with his pack, flew out through the

illusionary wall, disappearing from sight, but the dragon was still in the hall below. Surely Frivaldi's shout had awakened it. Cautiously, Durin peered over the gallery rail.

The dragon hadn't moved. Frivaldi, standing beside it, was beckoning furiously. Had he spotted the weapon? Had the Bane forced the dragon into a magical slumber? Was that why it wasn't waking up?

Durin took a deep breath and winced at the pain of his wounded shoulder. He slipped on the stoneskin ring, picked up his weapon, and walked, slowly and carefully, down the stairs. As he approached Frivaldi, he pitched his question in a whisper. "Where?"

"Here," Frivaldi replied.

He rapped the dragon's head a second time. A hollow, metallic echo sounded.

Durin felt his eyes widen.

"It's... it's iron," he gasped. "A statue."

"And look at this," Frivaldi said, pulling the dragon's jaw down. The mouth opened smoothly and silently, revealing a row of daggers that had been set into the jaw like teeth. "It's articulated. So are the wings. And the scales are all attached individually, to make the body more flexible. But what's most interesting of all is that, despite the fact that it's made from iron, there's not a speck of rust on it. The workings are as good as new. Which means it must be—"

"Magic," Durin said, completing the thought.

He ran a hand along the dragon's flank. It was true. The iron had an unusual bluish tinge, but otherwise seemed fresh from the forge. Yet it was clearly something that had been made long ago. It hadn't just arrived recently in the Hall of Hammers. It had been sitting there for centuries, waiting to launch itself through that illusionary wall.

"A golem," Durin whispered. "A golem in the shape of a dragon. So that's why the Bane of Caeruleus was too large to move."

"My conclusion, exactly."

Durin ignored the young dwarfs cocky comment. He sighed. Maybe Frivaldi was right. Maybe he was getting old. How had he not recognized the "dragon" for what it was?

Frivaldi peered at the golem, head cocked, and asked, "So how do you make it go?"

"You can't," Durin said. "Only a golem's creator can command it." "That's Torunn, right?" Frivaldi asked. Durin nodded.

"And Torunn's dead, so it's useless. We've come all this way for nothing."

Durin balled his fists. No. It couldn't be. All those decades, searching for the Bane, only to find...

Wait a minute. Closing his eyes, he recalled verse two hundred and seventeen of the saga, muttering it aloud.

"And when the Bane at last was wrought, "Bold Torunn ensorcelled it with a thought. "Its purpose to slay the dragon blue, "Yet this the bane would never do." Durin opened his eyes.

"Torunn did command it," he said. "The saga said so."

"Then why didn't it fly off and attack Caeruleus?" Frivaldi asked.

He let go of the jaw, which spring shut with a clank.

Durin glanced at a goblin skeleton that lay nearby, then at the illusionary wall. He could guess the answer—the goblins had overrun the Hall of Hammers before the illusionary wall could be dispelled. The golem, unable to see its intended target, had remained in place, waiting for it to appear, down through the centuries.

"We didn't come all this way for nothing," Durin said, an embarrassing amount of excitement in his voice. "The golem is lying dormant, just like the horde beetles. If a target should appear—if an illusion of a blue dragon could be created outside, and the illusionary wall was dispelled, the Bane might be lured back to Silverymoon." He slapped Frivaldi on the back. "We've done it!"

Frivaldi wasn't looking at him. He was staring at the

illusionary wall—and his eyes were getting bigger and his face paler by the moment.

"Uh, Durin..."

Durin glanced over his shoulder and felt his own face blanch as he spotted the dozen dragonkin who had just flown in through the illusionary wall. They landed on the floor of the hall and strode menacingly toward Durin and Frivaldi, talons clicking on the stone floor. The largest of the clutch—a dragonkin with one broken horn and a nasty sneer on its snout—pointed at Frivaldi.

"Magic," it barked in a crude approximation of the Dwarvish tongue. "Give. Or die."

Behind it, the other dragonkin chuckled.

Frivaldi glanced at Durin and asked, "What do I do? Give them my pack?"

Durin almost cracked a smile. Frivaldi, asking him for advice? He raised his axe. Even with the stoneskin ring, he wouldn't last long against such odds, but perhaps if he managed to look threatening enough, Frivaldi might be able to escape, to carry word that they'd found the Bane back to the order. He kept his expression stoic, careful not to betray the pain of his wounded shoulder. The blood had soaked his sleeve and was dripping onto the floor. He was already feeling a little faint. If only he had the healing potion—but it had been in his pack, which was gone.

"You're younger and faster," he told Frivaldi. "Toss your pack into the middle of them. They'll fight for it. Then run. Return to Silverymoon. Tell the Order..."

Frivaldi wasn't listening. He squatted down, unfastening his pack.

"Much magic inside," he told the dragonkin leader.

"What are you doing?" Durin asked, exasperated. "Go!"

"These guys are part dragon, right?" Frivaldi asked. "Yes, but—"

The dragonkin moved closer, elbowing each other as they angled for a look inside the pack. Their leader growled,

elbowing the nearest ones behind it.

"And the golem's primed to attack dragons."

"Not any dragon," Durin gritted. His hands were sweaty on the grip of the axe. If Frivaldi didn't run soon____"Just Caeruleus."

Frivaldi pulled a potion vial out of his pack and held it up.

"Hey guys, magic!"

He tossed the vial away and it shattered on the floor. Three of the dragonkin immediately leaped to that spot and began lapping at the spilled potion. A half dozen more tried to yank them back, to get a lick in themselves.

Frivaldi pulled the spinel out of his pack, holding it carefully.

"That's not what the saga said," the young dwarf said. " 'It's purpose—" He hurled the spinel up into the air. "—to slay dragons blue."

As the spinel raced toward the ceiling, the clutch of dragonkin leaped into the air, wings beating furiously. One grabbed it—and immediately erupted into a blue glow as the faerie fire spell the gem contained was activated. A second dragonkin rose behind it, wings flapping furiously, and slammed its fists down in a hammerlike blow on the top of the first one's head. The spinel dropped. Another dragonkin swooped in, grabbing it—and also began to glow with an eerie blue light. A third dragonkin grabbed the gem, only to have it knocked from its hand by a flying tackle, then a fourth...

The rest of the dragonkin rose into the air, eager to join in the sport. The dragonkin leader roared something at them, but they refused to listen. Teeth gnashing, the leader leaped into the air.

Durin heard a sound behind him: the smooth slide of metal on metal and the creak of a hinge. He turned.

The iron golem had raised its head. Its metal muscles flexed, wings flared open—and it lunged upward, snapping one of the glowing dragonkin out of the air. A severed leg tumbled out of its jaws, landing with a wet, bloody thud beside Durin.

"Yes!" Frivaldi yelled, punching a fist into the air. "Go get 'em, golem!"

By then, more than half of the dragonkin had touched the gem. Their leader—obviously smarter than the rest—railed at them, screeching in Draconian, then gave it up and fled through the illusionary wall. The golem tossed its head, flicking what remained of the bloody corpse aside, then roared its victory—a hollow sound like thunder reverberating through a bell. The dragonkin holding the gem gave a shrill squeak of fear, then dropped the spinel and bolted through the wall after its leader. The others followed as fast as their wings would carry them.

"Go!" Frivaldi cried at the golem, pointing at the illusionary wall. "Finish them off."

The golem reared up—then seemed to totter. A wing fell off, landing with a tremendous boom as it hit the stone floor.

"Huh?" Frivaldi asked, standing and blinking up at the golem. "Is it defective?"

The jaw fell off, narrowly missing the young dwarf. Sword-blade teeth bounced out of it and skittered across the floor.

Durin groaned as he realized what was happening.

"It's not defective," he yelled over the clatter of scales raining down from the golem. "The saga said 'dragon,' not 'dragons.' The golem killed a blue dragon—singular—and fulfilled Torunn's command. Now the elemental bound inside it is free."

Dropping his axe, he hurled himself at Frivaldi. The stupid, blundering fool. The Bane of Caeruleus—the artifact Durin had poured decades of his life into searching for—was falling apart. Ruined. Had it remained intact, it might have at last been used for its intended purpose. But instead...

His fists closed around Frivaldi's throat as rage pounded in his ears. Standard delving procedure be damned. He was going to kill that stupid, impulsive, undisciplined—Something slammed into Durin's head from above, knocking him unconscious.

Frivaldi yanked the cork out of the vial with his teeth, opened Durin's mouth, and poured the remainder of the healing potion down his throat. Durin sputtered. The wound in his shoulder closed, the bloody dent in his scalp disappeared, and his eyes fluttered open.

"What... what happened?" he croaked, sitting up.

Frivaldi picked up a sphere of iron the size of a mace head.

"One of the eyeballs fell out of the Bane of Caeruleus," he said. "It landed on your head."

As Frivaldi started to toss it aside, Durin spotted a mark on the sphere, next to the post that had mounted the eye in its socket.

He caught Frivaldi's wrist and said, "Let me have that."

Frivaldi hesitated then said, "You're not going to hit me with it, are you?"

Durin yanked the sphere out of his hands. Peering closely at it, he saw a spiral of runes that had been etched into the back of the eyeball, around the mounting post. They were tiny, each no larger than an oat grain. Fascinated, Durin started to read.

"I recovered your pack," Frivaldi said, holding it out like a peace offering. "I found it on the floor after the golem ... ah ... after the dragonkin fled. One of them must have dropped it. The side pouches are all torn up—the dragonkin must have sensed the magical items inside, and not been able to get at them—but the main pouch is intact. Lucky thing, too. That's where the healing potion was."

Durin glanced at the pack. It was a sorry sight, with its side pouches hanging in tatters and talon gouges through the Delver's "D" embossed on the main flap. No matter. It could be repaired. He continued to read the inscription, his excitement mounting.

Frivaldi lowered the pack and said, "Sorry about the golem. Are you still angry?"

Durin reached the end of the inscription.

"By all the gods," he muttered, his heart pounding like a war

drum. He glanced up at Frivaldi. "If it wasn't for you..."
Durin's face felt oddly tight; a moment later he realized he was grinning. Frivaldi took a step back, stumbling over one of the chunks of iron.

"I'm sorry. Really I am, Durin."

Durin chuckled and said, "Nothing to be sorry about, boy." He hefted the sphere. "Do you know what this inscription is?"

Frivaldi shook his head.

"The complete text of the spell used to create the Bane of Caeruleus. If you hadn't activated the golem, it might never have been discovered. But now..."

Frivaldi's eyes widened and he said, "Now we can make as many Banes as we like?"

"Exactly," Durin said. "And to fight any color of dragon we choose."

He picked up his shredded pack and tucked the sphere into its central section, then carefully tied the main flap shut.

"One thing more," he told Frivaldi. "Thank you for saving my life."

Frivaldi grinned.

"I figured I had to," he said. "Standard delving procedure. Uh ... Precious ARTifacts Need Expedient Rescue."

"PARTNER," Durin muttered after a moment's thought.

"Partner," he repeated, clasping Frivaldi's hand.

AN ICY HEART

Voronica Whitney-Robinson

16 Alturiak, the Year of Rogue Dragons (1373 DR)

Chorael slowly climbed out of the water, feeling sluggish. The sand was rough under her shell as she began the measured crawl along the bank of Lake Thaylambar. Though she was more vulnerable on land than she was in the water, she could still reach surprising speeds if she had to. But it was not one of those nights. With the moon riding high and full, it was a night for something rare and wonderful.

She moved her large body deliberately and methodically

over the ground, searching for just the right location. Though none of the others believed that any dragon turtle had ever become a guardian in, the region, Choraël felt certain one had. She had loved that spot from the moment she discovered it. It was where she always chose to lay her clutch

of eggs. The location brought her luck and she had no reason to believe things would be any different.

Choraël pushed away some branches and rocks and began to dig a small hole with her blue-green, clawed hands, occasionally using her sharp beak to break up roots and such. The ground, though somewhat soft to begin with after the daily evening rains controlled by the Red Wizards, gave way easily under her insistent touch. She carefully fashioned the hole into a burrow of sorts, packing the sides and tamping them to keep them stable. When she was satisfied that it was just deep enough, she turned around and climbed partially out. Then she did what she had come to do: lay her eggs.

In short order, five perfect, ovoid shells glowed softly in the moonlight, like fey pearls. Choraël stared at them for a few moments, in quiet awe. Only her third clutch, she was still rather new to motherhood. Her other two broods had done well and almost all had survived to young adulthood. That might have been why she considered the spot lucky, if not outright blessed. Dragon turtles left some things to fate, and their clutches were one of those things. They chose the place carefully, looking for geography that offered some natural protection. Both parents periodically visited the site to see that it remained undisturbed, but that was all. Choraël treated them no differently. She looked down at the precious treasure and smiled to herself.

After a few moments, she turned and used her rear legs to carefully push the pile of excavated sand gravel and debris back over the hole, gently burying the dear cargo. Each brush of a leg brought another load of cover over her eggs.

She didn't need to see them to know that they were nearly buried. She let her eyes travel the surface of the lake, not far away, and watched the moonlight splash and caper on the water's surface. It

was a near-perfect night. She wondered, briefly, what her mate, Dargo was doing at that moment and if he was still angry with her. His absence was the only mar on a perfect moment.

Not long before she had left to lay her eggs, she, Dargo, and the other dragon turtles had had a heated argument. Lately, that was all they ever did. A slow poison was sweeping across the world and word of it had finally reached the reclusive dragons of the lake. A strange madness that was coming to be referred to as the Rage was blanketing the land. Wyrms of every breed and color seemed to be vulnerable to infection. A near-blinding fury seized them and drove out all reason and sanity. The lunacy blinded some to such an extent that they became vulnerable to attack and too many had already been destroyed. Some were even driven to slaughter their own young. That had brought a shiver to Choraël's cold heart. But she knew Dargo had aimed that barb at her, specifically to frighten Choraël, knowing her time was near.

The only glimmer of hope that had appeared on the bleak horizon was a message from a representative of the lich who commanded the Cult of the Dragon. Long believed, or hoped, to be dead, Sammaster had risen from the ashes and once again commanded the Cult. Simply put, the message promised that if they would swear their allegiance to him, they would be spared the madness of the Rage. And he had a host of unaffected wyrms to authenticate his honeyed words. Mostly solitary, the dragon turtles only gathered in times of great crisis. Such a crisis had come.

"Don't you remember the stories," Dargo had reminded them, "of the earliest years when we first walked the land and swam the waters? There was a Rage like this that

washed over the world and we nearly died then. Do we want to face that again?"

Chorael had scanned the cove full of dragons and saw that many were considering his words. Some even nodded openly. She had to speak out even though she knew it would anger Dargo.

"So you would have us turn ourselves over to this lich?" she questioned him, startling him as the only real voice of dissension. "You would choose to be his slaves? And how would that be any better than to be a slave to this Rage, which may not even exist? We haven't seen it. It may not even be real, it might be something transitory, or it might burn itself out. But even if it is real," she admitted as she swam around the others, "wouldn't it be better than slavery?"

"We spend our time here, constantly on the patrol for the humans who hunt and trap us, and now you are considering giving up everything for a different kind of slavery?" she added and sank to the rocky shelf of the cavern and let the currents rock her gently.

Her eggs were nearly full size and she found it difficult to find a comfortable spot for very long.

The others had grown silent at her words. Even Dargo had given pause over it. She knew he had been frustrated and startled that she had not automatically sided with him and perhaps, even angrier that she had made sense. He refused to meet her look, pained that the others had started softly debating the matter.

"She has a point," Okara, one of the oldest in the lake interjected. He was nearly thirty feet long and his shell had more chips and cracks along his carapace than many had years in their lives. He pushed his front claw against the reeds as though annoyed with the vegetation. "Ever since the successful capture of one of our own by Brazhal Kos, the hunters have become increasingly bold. Too often, we spend our time avoiding the growing numbers of hunters that

seemed determined

to trap and break us. Would service to Sammaster be any different than service to the hunters?"

His final words had brought a hush to the gathered dragons. Dargo swam away as soon as the meeting was over and Choraël had not seen him for days. She suspected that it was his irritation that her words had turned the tide with many of the others that made him stay away on that special night. It was his way of showing how unhappy he was with her.

And he had missed the moment when she had laid their clutch. She was saddened by his decision but knew Dargo would be even more so after he had time to think on all that had been said. Though he was quicktempered, Choraël knew he was reasonable at heart. She liked to think that she balanced him and was the cool voice of reason to his fiery temper. When he and the others mulled over all the facts that they could gather, she was certain they would see that another option had to exist.

"I won't see you little ones be anyone's slaves," she whispered and patted the newly fashioned mound lovingly. "I promise you that."

With one more look at her nest, Choraël began to shuffle and crawl along the bank back to the frigid waters of the lake. Though tired from the effort of laying her eggs, she felt a renewed sense of hope at seeing them. New life always meant new opportunities, she believed. Caught up in her reverie, she almost didn't see the tiny figure a few hundred feet off on the lake. It was the additional flash of moonlight that caught her eye and for a moment, she hoped it was Dargo and that he had come after her. But as she looked more closely with her keen eyes, Choraël was disappointed. Splashing about on the lake was not a dragon, but a human. And judging by the way he flailed and thrashed his arms, one not well suited to swimming. Choraël felt the chill water touch her arms and started to pull herself

in, meaning to swim away as quickly as she could. Men on the water never boded well for her or any others who called the lake their home. Instinctually, she wanted to flee. But she paused. The night had been one of hope and dreams and full of promise. She found she did not want to have it sullied by any omens or portents of bad luck. And she found that in her icy heart, she didn't want anything to die on that night.

Pushing herself completely into the water, Choraël glided toward the frantic man as he bobbed and bounced. His head appeared at the surface less frequently and it was clear he had started to sink under the relatively calm waters. Choraël knew that humans quickly chilled in the lake. She and the other dragons were not immune to the cold, but their physiology was more adapted to their life there, with a special organ near their heart that helped them store heat and regulate their body temperature. Even though their bodies were cold in the lake, they didn't freeze. But Choraël had seen more than one human perish in no more than the blink of an eye as their limbs turned leaden from the cold and they sunk beneath the waves. The man seemed destined for the same fate.

As his head vanished from view, Choraël made her decision and dived beneath the waves, cleaving the lake surface like a knife. No longer bound by gravity's demands, she maneuvered through the water like a bird through the air, weightless. Though it was past middark, she could see everything with vivid clarity. Her own eyes were protected by three inner eyelids, the last one crystal clear. It was that lid that lowered over her eyes when she was in water and prevented any distortion. As though suspended in midair, the unfortunate man was only a few feet away.

He was dressed like many of the fishermen of Thay, without any sign of the heavier weapons favored by those foolhardy enough to try to capture a dragon. She hated that she paused long enough to verify what he was, but her goodwill

didn't extend beyond her own self-preservation. Not far off, she could see the silhouette of a small boat against the shine of the moonlight like some small eclipse. Choraël reasoned that he must have gotten a net tangled or had a strong pull on a line and been yanked into the black waters. She could see no one else nearby and thought he was foolish indeed to be on the water so late and alone. However, she would have been the first to admit that she never could understand the actions of humans and their foolish ways, nor did she try much to fathom them.

As she sped toward him, she could see that even as the cold had taken hold of his limbs and made them dead weight, the human's eyes still held some life in them. She could see their piercing blueness through the slow swirl his brown hair made around his face, and she saw a glimmer of fear in them as though he knew death was near. She wondered what he feared more: drowning or her approaching visage. .

When she was nearly underneath him, Choraël positioned her body carefully. The fisherman somehow found some strength, but he could only flail his useless arms once before giving up. When she felt his weight against her shell, she slowly pulsed her limbs and started to rise straight to the surface. She was careful not to jostle her cargo because she knew if she dropped him, he might not live long enough to survive a second rescue attempt.

Choraël broke the lake's surface for a second time that night and drew in a deep breath, filling her lungs and making herself even more buoyant. She could feel the limp man sprawled across her carapace and she

wondered if she had been in time. However, as she started to swim once more, she felt some movement as her burden rolled to one side and retched lake water down her shell. She smiled to herself as she heard his coughs and knew she had been in time. For the second time that evening, she wondered just what he might have been thinking at that moment as he found himself atop a creature such as herself.

Briefly, she feared that perhaps she might have made a mistake in saving him.

What if he finds this all to be wondrous and amazing? she thought. What if I just added fuel to an already dangerous situation? Well, what's done is done.

When she reached his boat, some distance away from where she had saved him, she floated there for a moment, hoping the man would simply roll off of her and back into his small vessel. But she could feel his even breathing as he just laid there. Not wanting to hurt him by bucking him off, she sighed inwardly and cleared her throat.

"You are safe," she said in Common.

Choreal tripped over the words because it had been some time since she'd had opportunity or motive to use the language. Her voice was slightly raspy and sounded like rocks scratching against themselves.

She wondered if the human might have lapsed into unconsciousness and was about to say something more when she felt him push himself up to a sitting position. The sensation of his hands on her carapace was strange and foreign, and she found she couldn't decide how it made her feel. She felt herself bob upward slightly as she was free of his meager weight. He slid into his boat.

For a few moments, both regarded each other warily, she from the safety of the water and he crouched behind the thin hull of his boat.

Choreal finally turned to move away when the shivering man rose from his squat and said in a shaky voice, "You saved me."

"Yes," Choreal finally answered.

"But I thought that—" he started and she cut him off.

"That we are monsters?" she asked. "I could say the same about you. It's what I heard."

She turned some more but the human called out to her, "Gregoire. My name is Gregoire. Do you have a name?"

Choreal was growing a bit exasperated and started to

reevaluate her decision to help him. Having found his voice, the human seemed determined to use it. She realized it had been better when he had been retching water and silent.

"You couldn't pronounce it even if I told you," she said. "Now, you have enough to tell your tavern cronies tonight. I wish you good fortune and good even."

"Is there any way I can thank you?" he asked.

Chorael looked him over, from his tunic and pants, which upon closer inspection were of a finer weave than many fishermen sported, to his small boat that also looked slightly sturdier and more solid than most fishing vessels on the lake.

"You have nothing that I would desire in payment."

She started to swim away from the tiny boat slowly, so as not to capsize it and dump the hapless human into the water for a second time. He called out to her again.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

Chorael was torn between entering the soothing darkness of the depths and her growing curiosity with the man who didn't seem to want her to leave. Her curiosity finally overcame her desire to leave and she circled back to him.

She could see that he was

carefully coiling up a line from the water. A sharp tug from that line might have been why he'd found himself in the lake.

"There is one thing," she told him.

"Anything," he replied eagerly, excited she had returned.

"Tell your brothers to leave us in peace," she replied and hoped that her request, coupled with the fact that she had saved him, would negate any desire he or his friends might have to capture one of her kind in the future.

"Of course," he agreed and continued to coil up his line.

Chorael cocked her head some at the sight of it. It struck her as odd that the line was thicker than most she had seen and realized it was almost like rope.

Too heavy for fishing, she thought.

Then it struck her that he seemed slightly out of place as a

fisherman, clothes and gear just a bit too fine. And he had been so eager to talk to her when most might have been just too stunned by their near-death to say a word. Almost as if he was distracting her.

She quickly scanned the waters for any other vessels, fearing a trap. But she couldn't see any other boats anywhere else on the water. With a sinking dread she realized that she was not the prey that night, but something else was: her eggs.

Without another word, she plunged into the water and swam furiously back to where she had laid her clutch. Choraël once again pulled her lumbering body across the sandy bank. She didn't need to go much farther. In the bright moonlight, there was no mistaking the desecration that lay in front of her.

Her carefully buried mound had been haphazardly dug up and her eggs unearthed. All but one was gone and the one that remained was hopelessly ruined. Whoever had dug them up had been careless and crushed part of the egg underfoot. Nutritional fluid bled over the sand and Choraël could see the undeveloped head of her child peek through the broken shell. She crawled over slowly, her body shaking of its own volition.

With a trembling claw, she reached out as though to caress the skull of her only remaining child. As she did so, Choraël realized that the human had been a decoy, meant to lure her away from her eggs. That was why he had the line, so that he could pull himself out of the water as she had approached him. Maybe he had figured that she would attack him, but had been caught unaware by her actions. Or maybe the cold had simply affected him more than he had anticipated. She didn't know and she didn't care. All she knew was that he had stolen her future from her.

With one final glance at her baby, Choraël hissed, "And I helped him!"

She scrambled back into the water and tore after Gregoire

like something possessed. And as she bore down on his tiny vessel, Choraël felt something alien grow inside of her. Her white-hot anger burned even brighter and seemed to be stoked by an other-worldly force. Vaguely, she wondered if it was the Rage that she had heard of and realized if it was, she no longer cared.

Choraël saw the outline of the human's small boat above her and she pushed straight up toward it, building momentum with each stroke. First her head and her upper body burst through the bottom of the vessel and she briefly saw Gregoire. She thrashed her head and torso from side to side, and the tiny ship was torn asunder as though an explosion had ripped through it. Choraël, diving back under, swam in a slow, deliberate arc, sweeping her clawed hands through the dark water. With measured strokes, she circled back to the boat and her fate.

Little remained of the vessel after her fierce onslaught. Rising up from the depths, she easily pushed her way through the flotsam that bobbed and bounced along the lake's surface. Like fallen leaves, the splintered timbers and planks were simply an annoyance to her and not even noticeable as they slapped and smashed against her blue-green carapace. Her keen eyes were fixed on one target alone and it filled her vision, bounced back and forth, echoing off of her lenses until it was all that she could see. Swimming in a broken fashion, Gregoire was not even a league away. Choraël smelled his blood in the water and nothing had ever seemed as sweet to her as that moment did. She savored it, reveled in it and she felt the Rage grow stronger. Every stroke she made pushed her old life farther and farther away. She no longer resisted it, but let the fires grow, burning her up from within, melting her cold heart and finally consuming it.

The dragon turtle bore down on the hapless hunter like an avenging angel. He turned in her direction and Choraël could see that he knew he was doomed. All else was lost to

her but the single man floating in front of her, leading the way like some glowing beacon. Choraël cut through the waves deftly and she imagined what sounds he would gurgle when she sank her sharp, beaklike mouth into his vulnerable torso. They would be music to her, no matter what. She sped forward.

As she neared the betrayer, the man who raided her nest, Choraël did not see that his comrades-in-arms, those who had actually removed her eggs, had launched boats of their own and had circled back around. Moving quickly in two separate vessels, they flanked the dragon turtle. Normally, her sharp vision would have picked them out easily even if the moonlight hadn't have been so bright. The double lenses in her eyes allowed light and images to bounce back and

forth within the occipital chamber and grow more intense. But the Rage had gripped Choraël and the only other image she saw besides the hunter barely treading water was the image of her defiled nest; the broken shells and shattered dreams. She had no idea that her own death was so near at hand.

Unlike his boat, the ships of his cohorts were well equipped for dragon hunting. As Choraël bore down on Gregoire, his assistants launched spears and harpoons into the air. Choraël, consumed with vengeance, didn't see them and made no move to dodge them. One after another of the iron tipped lances struck her carapace, piercing the tough shell. Somehow, the hunters managed to pull her back and stop her inches from Gregoire.

Choraël, denied her vengeance, reared up and thrashed madly against the tethers. Choraël released a spew of burning steam but disorientated and lost in her bloodlust, struck no one. She screamed out and the sound echoed off the lake for miles and miles around. Every other living thing grew silent at the sound of her death throes. The water grew slick with her blood and Choraël grew weaker and weaker. As

her outer lids grew heavy, she turned to face Gregoire. The last sight she saw was his fearful face bathed in a red haze. Then her eyes closed forever and her lifeless body bobbed between the two boats like a marionette.

Dargo's eyes were not made for tears. Even if he had been capable, they would have been dwarfed by the lake itself and lost all meaning. Still, in his heart, he wept for Choraël and the final fate that had been served so undeservedly to her. She had merited better, though even he had warned her of the folly of aiding

the damned humans. Nothing but tragedy could have come from their meeting and he was right, though he wished otherwise. And he had seen more tonight than the death of his beloved sometimes-mate. He had seen firsthand the true measure of the Rage and what it could mean to his people. He arrived only in time to watch the hatred and anger wash over the gentlest spirit he had ever known, and see what folly that madness had led her to.

Was this to be their fate as well, he wondered? To be blinded by fury to the point of death or destruction at the hands of the hated humans? Or even worse, to be enslaved by them until they achieved the freedom that only twilight offered a dragon?

No, he told himself with a growing anger that surprised even him in its sudden ferocity. I will not allow it even if it means slavery of a different kind.

He resolved himself to speak with the remaining council members about the offer Sammaster made to their kind. With the only truly dissenting member of their group gone in such a horrific manner, Dargo was certain there would be no other opposition to the lich's offer. If he had been more of a philosopher or a sage, the dragon turtle might have pondered over the twist fate had taken when it made the staunchest opponent to Sammaster become the greatest example for those remaining to embrace his offer instead of facing pointless death. However, philosophy was not his

strong suit. He was simply one who had watched his love meet destruction in the flames of the Rage and was determined to lose no one else to it, no matter the cost.

With one final glance at the surviving humans as they hauled away Choraël's body, Dargo dived deep into the lake. To all the surface world, his retreating form looked like nothing more than moonlight dancing on the waves.

Deeper and deeper he dived, determined to find the others before another moment was lost. The dragon turtles would embrace the Cult of the Dragon and find some salvation in it. And as he dived on to the black depths at the heart of Lake Thaylambar, he felt his heart grow cold and icy as though a never-ending winter had taken hold and no spring would ever thaw again.

PENITENTIAL RITES.

Keith Francis Strohm

6 Ches, the Year of Rogue Dragons

Candle wax dripped like blood in the crowded chapel.

Drakken Thaal scratched at his rough gray robe and gazed at the congealing liquid with barely concealed annoyance.

The acrid stench of incense blanketed the air, nearly choking him, while a stinking mass of human and elven bodies pressed in on all sides. From a distant loft, deep-throated voices warbled out unappealing harmonies. A sharp shake of his wickedly horned head brought little relief from the incessant sound—though it did elicit several disapproving comments from members of the crowd nearby. Slowly, he turned to face the nattering imbeciles and let the full weight of his black-scaled visage fall upon them. He smiled at the fear in their eyes, pointedly

revealing several rows of cruelly barbed teeth. It would be a simple thing to grab each of them and—

By Ilmater's Tears, Drakken cried silently, what am I doing?

He stopped his forward movement, bowed low, and softly growled an apology. Before the stunned crowd could react, he pushed past them, stopping only when he reached the

relative isolation of a shadowed apse.

Something was wrong.

Looking out from the recesses of his darkened vantage, Drakken's eyes fell on the shroud-covered corpse resting upon the main altar. Arranoth Fen, Sub-Prior of the Monastery of the White Willow, and the only brother who had championed his request for sanctuary within the monastery's sacred walls, lay stiff and lifeless, wrapped in a stark, thrice-blessed cerement and surrounded by his Ilmatari brethren who stood vigil as the cleric's spirit traveled at last to rest in the crook of the Crying God's arms. Perhaps the truest friend he had ever known lay dead—and Drakken felt nothing at all.

No, not nothing. For to say such a thing would be a great lie, and though he had been many things in his cursed life, he had never been a liar. Something stirred in the soundless depths of his heart, a familiar, slumbering beast slow to awaken, yet driven by hunger. It scented the air, waiting patiently—ever so patiently.

Drakken felt fear and disgust, and truth be told, not a little anticipation. When he'd first come to the monastery, five years and a lifetime ago, he came as a warlord. Born of a father so monstrous he was disemboweled by the claws of his own people and a mother too weak to bear him into the world and live, he grew up shunned, until he had learned the measure of his own power. It wasn't long before he had gathered an

army of bitter men and monsters and used his draconic heritage to lay a path of wrack and ruin in his wake. Hatred had been his driving thirst, and though he had tried to slake it in the blood of innocents, it would always return more insistent than before.

Until the day he heard the weeping of a god and found himself kneeling before the gates of White Willow Monastery. Since then, he had spent his time in service to Ilmater's chosen. Though at first a difficult adjustment, Drakken had

found a measure of peace and stillness within the simple rhythm of monastic life and the aching purity of the brethren's worship. He often rose in the middle of the night, that silent hour when the breath of the world was stilled, to gaze upon the Icon of the Broken Deity. There he encountered, in the midst of Ilmater's wounds, a kinship with his god, a humbling sense of his own brokenness. It was in those rare moments that he felt most beloved and impossibly, most whole—as if his wounds were somehow bound up with those of the Crying God.

All of that seemed so far away.

Prayer and peace, stillness and song—it all tasted like ash in his mouth, and had since the nightmares began. Each night for the past month he'd been chased from sleep, waking with a bloodcurdling roar upon his frothing lips. The memory of past acts, or the hope of future atrocities? It was difficult to tell. All he could remember of those nocturnal visions was the metallic taste of blood. Though he'd gone to Brother Phenotar for a draught of sleeping herbs, the mixture did little to stop the nightmares and in fact, seemed to bring them into greater focus. The past night, he had dreamed in vivid detail of his clawed hands wrapped around Brother Arranoth's throat. When he awoke to begin the day's labor, word had spread of the sub-prior's death—along with the rumor that the elder brother's passing had not been a natural one.

Blessed Ilmater what is happening to me?

Breathing became more difficult. Reaching out, the half-dragon pressed a scaled hand against the flowing stained glass of the apse window. Desperately, he tried to join his voice to those of the congregation, who echoed softly the prayers of the Ilmatari brethren.

No sound emerged.

He cast about for help, but everywhere he looked the penitent saw only the slow, measured spilling of wax, as candles spent their life keeping shadows at bay.

By the time the abbot's summons found him, Drak-ken was drowning in blood.

"Troubling," Brother Meremont, Abbot of White Willow, said, his long fingers steeped beneath an angular jaw.

A fire burned fitfully in the austere stone room. Drakken watched the play of light and shadow accent the abbot's well-lined face. Thin, graying hair and a tightly groomed goatee gleamed like burnished silver in the flickering illumination; eyes the color of moon-mist regarded him carefully from deep pools of darkness.

The half-dragon sat uneasily on his high-backed chair, waiting for more. Yet it was the fire's voice, hissing and crackling, that alone spoke into the silence. Drakken could hear within its susurrus the burning sound of his own condemnation.

Though gentle, the abbot had insisted that Drakken share whatever had been burdening him—for his disturbance at Arranoth's Vigil earlier had not gone unnoticed. Beneath the elder cleric's kindly gaze, the half-dragon had felt compelled to speak. The tale had

come slowly at first, gallingly so. The cruel warlord who had ordered the death of thousands with a few bitter words found his tongue heavy with the weight of doubt. The abbot, however, had proven a patient listener. Stumbling phrases became halted sentences, which in turn became a torrent of language, as the struggling penitent spoke of his growing frustration and anger, his confusion, and finally, the nightmares culminating in the vision of Arranoth's murder by his own hands.

The abbot held his gaze a moment more, extending the awkward silence. Drakken gripped his armrest so tightly, the wood groaned in protest. At last, the elder cleric rose slowly from his seat and walked to a shelf of carved stone, tracing a gnarled finger absently across the faded gilt lettering of several leather-bound books.

"No doubt you heard the rumors surrounding the Sub-Prior's

death." The abbot's rich baritone echoed in the room.

Drakken nodded, finally releasing his iron grip upon the chair, and said, "Of course—"

"They are true," Abbot Meremont interrupted. "Several younger brothers found Arranoth's body in the root cellar." The abbot paused, casting a glance back at the half-dragon. "His throat had been torn out."

The half-dragon jumped to his feet, as if burned. The sudden movement upended his chair, and it tilted wildly before crashing to the stone floor.

"Then, Blessed One, I submit myself to Ilmater's justice," Drakken nearly growled. His head swam with conflicting emotion. Relief at finally being caught warred with anger and underneath it all, a disturbing sense of satisfaction. "Confine me to my cell until you have passed judgment," he continued, the words spilling out in a torrent. "Lock me away before I kill again! I am a danger—"

"Enough!" Meremont shouted.

Drakken recoiled as if he'd been slapped and found himself staring numbly at the formidable cleric, as if seeing for the first time the man whom the young novices called "The Iron Abbot."

"Unless something very unusual has happened within the last few minutes," Meremont continued in a softer, but no less unyielding voice, "I am still the spiritual head of this abbey. And—" his eyes flashed a dangerous warning as Drakken opened his mouth to speak—"/will decide the guilt or innocence of those under my care. Is that clear?"

The half dragon nodded in desultory agreement— though he could feel a dangerous fire growing within his heart. He'd ripped the tongue from many a human for far less an offense against him. A low rumble began deep within his massive chest. His clawed hands twitched, as if eager to part the cleric's flesh. The half-dragon took a step toward the old man.

If the abbot felt any fear at his advance, Drakken could not

see it. The cleric returned his measured gaze evenly. The half-dragon's monstrous face split into a toothy smile. It had been a very long time since he had faced an opponent worthy of his respect. He took another step forward, and stopped. The air within the abbot's chamber grew heavy with anticipation, like the moment before a raging storm. And cleared suddenly, as the pounding of fists thudded dully on the chamber door.

"Blessed One, is everything all right?" came a muffled tenor voice from behind the dark oak wood.

"Yes, Brother Anwen," replied the abbot, once again the kindly cleric. "We are quite all right. Would you be so good as to bring in some of Brother Rafhard's root stew—and some tea, as well?"

Drakken heard a heavy sigh before footsteps faded softly in to the distance. Silence ruled the room once more. Meremont smiled, and motioned to the fallen chair. The half-dragon bent down and righted the furniture. Whatever had possessed him a moment ago had faded, like the heat from a bonfire suddenly banked. However, he felt the warmth of its embers burning fitfully somewhere deep within him.

Another knock on the door followed, as three white-robed novices appeared quietly, two with stoneware crocks in hand. The third carried a tray with steaming mugs. Each bowed carefully to the abbot and placed the food and drink upon the wooden desk before leaving.

"Something is indeed amiss with you," the abbot said, holding a mug of tea between his ancient hands, "something most unfortunate, if mysterious. But murder—no." He shook his head in emphasis. "I do not believe that you are to blame for Arranoth's death."

"But how can you be sure, Blessed One?" Drakken asked.

The half-dragon sat with arms tightly folded across the expanse of his muscular chest. It was the only way he could disguise the trembling of his hands.

"Do you remember what brought you to us, my son?" the

cleric asked.

"Of course," the struggling penitent responded. Then, after seeing the abbot's expectant look, he protested. "You already know why I came to the abbey!"

Meremont set down his mug of tea and once more turned his gaze upon the half-dragon.

"The question is, do you?" he said with a hint of the old iron in his voice.

Drakken relented. Years following the bloody path of the sword had shown him how to evaluate the tides of war. It was a battle he would not win.

"My army had just overrun another village," the half-dragon spoke after only another moment's hesitation. "Which one I did not know, for they all began to bleed together in my mind. We had already killed the men and put the women to work, but it was the children..."

He stopped, unable to continue. The memory of that day lived fresh in his mind, burned there permanently. Talking about it made it more real. The scent of blood, the screams of the dying and those who prayed for death. Fire, sword, and pain—he was among them once again; their master and in truth, their slave. For five years, he had lived each day in the middle of that moment, that never-ending abyss. Peace was a forgetting of sorts, a brief respite from the dark demands of guilt and shame. Remembering it all, however, he felt the stirrings of a darker hunger.

"There was a man," Drakken continued, forcing his mind away from the swamp of his inner thoughts, "dressed in old rags. He was weeping loudly, sobbing over the broken bodies around him. It was as if I could hear in his voice the wails of every dead man, woman, and child in the village. It made me angry. I drew my sword and approached him. I could see that his body was scarred, broken as well. I angled my sword above his head, ready to drive the point into his brain—and he looked at me. Those eyes..." Drakken paused again, his own face suffused with wonder. "They were like

stars burning into my heart. I knew at once who he was—and that he wasn't crying for the villagers who died."

Another pause, and Drakken leaned forward before speaking. His voice, when it finally came, rumbled with emotion.

"He was weeping for me.

"I dropped my sword and stared at the man, not caring who witnessed. I turned my head for a moment, and when I looked back, he was gone. I searched the village high and low for him, bellowing hard at my men when I could not find him. I sent out scouts into the wild woods beyond the camp, and when they eventually came back empty-handed, I wandered the hills myself. I searched for days, driven on by the wound his long gaze had made in my heart. The next thing I remember, I found myself kneeling before the door to White Willow, begging to come in."

Drakken rested his scaled head against the back of the chair, closing his eyes, and finished, "I am so sick of blood."

"There, you see," said the abbot. "You have your answer. You could no more have killed Brother Arranoth than I."

Drakken swallowed hard. The weight of Meremont's faith pressed in upon him.

"How can you be so sure, Blessed One, when I doubt myself so?"

The old cleric took a careful sip of tea from the earthenware mug, and his thin lips parted in a gentle smile.

"It is not your belief—or lack of it—that I find important," he said. "For good or ill, Ilmater chose you. You did not choose him. I trust that choice."

The half-dragon frowned, still unconvinced. Though the time he had spent at the abbey had watered the seed of his own faith, Drakken found the concept that a god would take special interest in him disturbing. Besides, he thought bitterly, no one could deny the damning evidence of his dreams. Perhaps he was beyond the reach of any god.

He shared none of his thoughts' dark turnings with the

abbot.

"If I didn't kill Arranoth," he asked instead, hoping to direct the course of the conversation away from him, "then who did?"

"The truth is," the abbot replied, "we don't know. Some opposing power frustrates our attempts at divination. I have sent a letter to the temple near They-marsh, hoping that the Ilmatari clerics there can send someone with greater skills than we have here in our humble abbey."

Meremont paused, setting down his mug before continuing in an even voice, "Which is why, ultimately, I wished to speak with you."

Drakken stared at the old cleric, trying not to feel like a rabbit caught in a carefully prepared snare—and failing.

"Until we have received help from Theymarsh," the abbot said, "I want you to investigate the murder of Brother Arranoth."

"Me?" the half-dragon nearly shouted. "Why-?"

"Simply because," Meremont interjected, "I ask it."

Drakken caught the dangerous flash of fire in the stern abbot's eyes and stifled his protest.

"Besides," the cleric reasoned, "you have been servant to the brethren for many years. Your coming and going will remain unnoticed by any of the brothers. You are uniquely suited for this investigation"

"And," Drakken said at last, not quite keeping the bitterness from his voice, "if the murderer does dwell among us, I am quite capable of 'dealing' with him."

"Perhaps," the abbot offered with a slight frown. "But there is something else, as well. Rangers from the Win-terwood have reported a large band of humanoids—ores-heading out of the forest toward the surrounding hills."

"What do they seek? Are they a warband? What are their numbers?" Drakken asked.

Despite his time as a servant to the Servants of Ilmater, martial instincts long buried flared to life. He found himself

calculating the best means of defending the abbey walls from ores.

"From what the rangers have reported, they are fleeing the depredations of the green dragon known as Foilsunder. A few tendays ago, the beast began rampaging through the Winterwood, apparently destroying everything in its path. The rangers have not been able to come up with a final tally, but they suspect the band of ores measures over a hundred, with several shamans in tow."

"Then we should seal the abbey gates and post scouts in the hills." Drakken stood and began pacing back and forth. "There is much to do."

"Yes," agreed the abbot, "and I have already done it. Messengers are even now making their way to the nearby villages and offering sanctuary at the abbey. Every brother is preparing for the influx of refugees. That is why I need you to focus on finding Arranoth's killer. I can spare no one else."

"But I wouldn't even know where to begin," Drakken protested weakly.

He was born for war, not slinking around in the darkness. Somehow, he would make the abbot see the mistake he was making. But Meremont held up his hand in a gesture that forestalled any further deliberation.

"Begin by looking in Brother Arranoth's cell," the abbot ordered. "Perhaps you will find something useful there."

A knock on the door interrupted the cleric.

"That will be Brother Prior," Meremont said. "We have much work to do. Now go, and report back to me anything that you find."

Drakken nodded numbly, unable to fathom exactly how he had been drafted to that duty when danger threatened the abbey from without. The abbot called out Ilmater's blessing on the half-dragon as he turned to walk out of the abbot's room.

Night covered the abbey like a shroud, cloaking the chill stone halls of the chapter house in inky darkness. Drakken

held a battered lantern in one hand, its feeble illumination casting a gray pall before him. Thick shadows danced madly at the edge of the meager lamplight. For the third time in as many minutes the half-dragon found himself cursing the strange fate that brought him to wander the halls of the brothers' residence like an ancient wraith.

Twice that day he had attempted to see Brother Abbot, hoping to convince the abbey's leader that he would be of greater use to White Willow coordinating its defense, if indeed the fleeing ores made their way to the monastery's borders. Both times Meremont had been locked away with his advisors. Drakken had eventually resigned himself to carrying out the abbot's orders until such time as he could plead his case once more with the cleric. So, the half-dragon had gone about his regular duties—cleaning, cooking, and otherwise serving the needs of the abbey's inhabitants—all the while keeping a careful ear out for any hint of gossip or whisper of truth that might have a bearing on Brother Arranoth's murder.

One thing was certain, Abbot Meremont's belief that Drakken would remain largely unnoticed as the Ilmatari spoke freely among themselves proved quite true. Though at first treated with a fair degree of suspicion, anger, and—among some brothers—downright hatred, the half-dragon's attempts at humble service and penance, while not completely successful, especially in the early months, had eventually softened the community of clerics. Quite simply, the gray-robed half-dragon realized that he had, over the intervening years, become a quiet fixture in the monastery, as

much a part of the daily rhythms of contemplative life as was the bowl-shaped bell that called the brothers to prayer. It was amazing that Drakken had never realized it before.

Once he had noticed, however, he had felt a rising surge of anger at the casual dismissal he witnessed in the eyes of the Ilmatari. All day this anger had ebbed and flowed like the

raging tide of a tumultuous sea. More than once he had stopped himself from challenging an unsuspecting brother, forcing the man's attention by an act of violence. He had fought this growing anger, all day as he went about his duties, focusing ultimately on the task at hand—bringing Brother Arranoth's killer to justice.

It would have been a great deal easier, however, if the signs didn't point to him.

Despite his privileged position as a nearly invisible eavesdropper, Drakken had heard nothing of real substance. To be sure, Arranoth's murder had been on everyone's mind. In fact, it was the most popular topic of whispered conversations in the whole abbey. No one, however, had made mention of anything useful. The most interesting thing that he had heard involved three ancient abbey servants and their belief that Arranoth was murdered by the angry ghost of a novice who had drowned near the abbey a decade past.

And so he found himself skulking through the sleeping expanse of the chapter house.

Drakken stopped his reverie as he came to a closed wooden door. Pushing it open, he entered the brother's vaulted dining hall. He had to move carefully through the large room, avoiding long wooden benches and thick oak tables. Not for the first time, the half-dragon cursed his adopted habit of carrying a light source—even though his draconic vision would more than suffice for piercing the veil of darkness around

him. He'd given some of the abbey's older inhabitants quite a fright the first few times he'd surprised them wandering through the pitch black halls in the dark. Since then, he always made sure to carry a lamp or candle with him to warn others of his presence.

Beyond the dining hall, Drakken found himself in a curving stone passage. Three more turns brought him to the simple staircase leading to the second floor of the chapter house. A

few more twists and the half-dragon stood before the stone door to Brother Arranoth's cell.

He hesitated for a moment, listening to the soft murmurs of whispered prayers and the creaking of settling stone and timber. All around him in the darkness, the holy house hummed. Drakken took a deep breath, and opened the door, blowing out the wildly flickering lamp as he did so.

It took a moment for the half-dragon's eyes to compensate for the darkness. Drakken experienced a passing disorientation, and the contours of the room resolved in ever crisper detail. A simple straw mat lay neatly against the far wall, coarse wool bedding folded neatly at one end. Beneath a closed and shuttered window, Drakken could see a solidly made oak desk and a simple, straight-backed chair. A somewhat drab armoire stood in the far corner. The half-dragon found the starkness of the dead cleric's quarters heightened by the black and white lens of his darkvision.

Everything in the austere cell, from the placement of the simple furniture to the orderly arrangement of quill, paper, and ink upon the desk, spoke of the man that Drakken knew. For Arranoth was an ascetic, even by the rigorous standards of the Ilmatari. Contemplative and serious, the cleric's wisdom was known throughout the community, and yet he had carried himself with an air of true humility. The sub-prior's only concession to his exalted place within the abbey's

leadership was an old, dented coal pot stored beneath the writing desk. For some reason, the presence of the decrepit metal pot brought a smile to Drakken's face. He thought of the bright light that shone behind the sub-prior's eyes whenever he was asked a question that required thought, a light that death's domain had dimmed. The smile faded.

Remembering why he had come, the half-dragon gave the room a perfunctory search, uncomfortable with the thought that the ghost of Arranoth might even then be looking at his killer as he ransacked the man's humble sanctum. He rooted

through the cleric's frayed robes hanging in the armoire, looked around the mattress and bedding, and scanned the surface of the desk. Besides several prayer beads and a small silver symbol of Ilmater, the half-dragon found nothing that might point to the man's killer.

Frustrated, he sat down on the chair and gave the desk one final look. Beneath a neatly arranged pile of paper, he found a thin book, covered in calfskin-something he had almost missed in his first hurried examination. He opened the book, instantly recognizing the crisp, flowing script that was so characteristic of Arranoth's hand. Drakken traced his finger along the uneven cut of the page's edge, marveling at the simple beauty of the cleric's work. The lines of script eventually resolved themselves into words, and soon the half-dragon found himself engrossed in the inner thoughts of the dead cleric. Wry observations about abbey life were interspersed with prayers to Ilmater and to Drakken's great surprise, insights about the nature of the spiritual life that touched him so deeply he would have shed tears if he were able.

Without warning, the journal came to an end mid-sentence. The effect jarred Drakken out of his reflective mood. He would have slammed the book closed, but saw, at the last second, a jagged strip of paper along its spine. Looking closer, the half-dragon could see that the last few pages of the journal had been torn out.

But why would Arranoth tear out just those pages when he showed no sign of editing the rest of his journal? Drakken's mind raced with possibilities. Perhaps someone else tore those pages out. The question of why, however, still remained.

He flipped through the rest of the book, quickly examining the empty pages. As he neared the end, a small swatch of dyed wool fell into his lap. He picked it up between clawed fingers. His darkvision couldn't reveal much else, but the acrid stench of the dye still hung about the wool. Drakken

started to stand up and reach for the unlit lantern he'd placed on the floor— and he froze.

At the edge of his hearing, barely perceptible in the night, something scuffed against the stone floor. The half-dragon cocked his head, listening more intently. There it was again, but closer.

Someone was just outside the door!

Drakken crept toward the opening, careful to keep out of anyone's line of sight should they be peering into the cell from the hallway. Though he didn't want to frighten a sleepy cleric on his way to the garderobe, the half-dragon was not about to allow anyone to offer him a knife to the back. Years of peaceful service did little to erase the warrior's habits. A moment more of waiting...

And he pounced—only to grab empty air.

The hallway stood empty. Only the muted rumble of distant snores registered to his sensitive ears. He was alone.

As the half-dragon turned back to the empty cell, something caught his eye. A small piece of paper lay crumpled on the ground. Drakken swept the paper up and quickly unfolded it.

What he saw forced him to catch his breath. There, written on paper clearly torn from Arranorth's journal were the words: Meet me two nights hence in the Upper Cellar

—A Friend

The half-dragon's heart raced. There, perhaps, was some proof that he was not personally responsible for the noble cleric's death! But if so, he thought soon after, then darker wheels were turning within the abbey's slumbering walls.

Drakken hurried out of the room, barely shutting the door, and sped off into the darkness. He was halfway to his own cell when he realized that he had forgotten his lantern.

Mid-morning sun bathed the courtyard in rosy radiance.

Drakken inhaled the early spring air, tinged with the aroma of flowering buds and the sharp spice of frost. Around him, gray-robed clerics and abbey servants went about their

business in dignified chaos. Livestock and wagons laden with nuts, grain, and barley crossed paths with burly men, sweat dripping from thick beards as they labored beneath earthen jugs of water and wine. Off in the distance, a cock crowed, undaunted by its lateness in announcing the sun's presence.

Drakken, however, paid none of it any heed. Despite a morning spent in fruitless search for anything or anyone connected to the swath of dyed wool he'd

discovered in Arranoth's room, the half-dragon felt little frustration. He'd slept undisturbed the previous night—the first time in tendays—after returning to his cell. Perhaps, he thought as he continued on his way, he was finally free of the anger that had plagued him for so long. At that moment, a thick gray cloud passed overhead, hiding the sun. Despite himself, the half-dragon shivered.

Moving away from the main courtyard that functioned as the heart of White Willow Abbey, Drakken followed the small alleyways between several stone and wood buildings. After morning prayer, he'd walked quietly among the Ilmatari, inquiring about the possible origins of the dyed wool. Since no one could provide him with anything other than generalities about the quality of the dye and the craft-worthiness of the wool's spin, he'd decided to visit Brother Phenotar in the healer's workshop to see if the man had any more information on Arranoth's death.

Well known for his noxious potions and noisome unguents, the young brother set up his workshop against the south wall of the abbey, farthest away from the chapter house—to the approval of all the brothers. It took Drakken a few more minutes to arrive at the small wooden building that housed the abbey's resident herbalist. He knocked once and entered.

It took the half-dragon a moment to adjust to the riot of sights and smells that greeted him. Clumps of dried and drying herbs hung from every rafter, while a number of

small, soot-blackened pots bubbled and boiled in the corner. The tables—old battered trestles burned and scarred with the remains of the herbalist's experiments—looked ready to buckle beneath the weight of countless thick librams, weathered alembics, and the detritus of tools for which Drakken had no name. A cloud of conflicting smells made war in the low-roofed structure, nearly choking the half-dragon.

He waited a few moments until it was clear that neither the cleric, studiously observing something in a small dish with a hand magnifying glass, nor his bustling novice herbalists had noticed his arrival.

"Brother Phenotar," he said somewhat softly, not used to his normally eye-catching appearance going unnoticed.

"Brother," he said again, more forcefully.

White Willow's Brother Herbalist looked up in obvious surprise at his visitor, still holding the magnifying lens up to one eye. He gazed imperiously at the half-dragon, though the effect was somewhat mitigated by the cleric's abnormally enlarged eye peering from behind the glass.

"Hmmm... hmmm..." came the herbalist's response.

The alchemist snapped his fingers. At once, the young novices scurried out of the room, not making a single sound.

"You have them well trained," Drakken said as the last white-robed boy left the workshop, closing the small door behind him.

"Rascals all of them," Phenotar sniffed. "And not one of them with the brains necessary to tell the difference between purging buckthorn and celery, if you must know.

"Still," he added with a crooked smile, "I've grown quite fond of them. But don't you be telling them that I said so! They'll be impossible to deal with."

He turned back to the small dish in an obvious huff.

"Brother Phenotar," Drakken said again, caught between amusement and a growing sense of frustration, "I've come to see if you can tell me anything more about Brother

Arranoth's..." he stumbled over the word, "... murder."

"Hmmm... hmmm..." the herbalist replied, and broke off from whatever it was that had caught his attention. "Murder... oh yes, Arranoth. Terrible thing that was," Phenotar put down the magnifying lens. "Brother Abbot asked me to examine the body."

"Yes, I know," the half-dragon replied, the frustration finally creeping in to his voice. "That's why I've come. The abbot asked me to investigate the events surrounding the sub-prior's death."

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place?" the herbalist asked.

Drakken stifled a thick-chested growl. The morning's newfound equilibrium vanished in a flash of anger.

"What have you found?" was all the half-dragon managed between clenched teeth.

"Something, to be sure," Phenotar replied, oblivious to Drakken's mounting rage, "but it's too soon to draw any conclusions. I need to verify a few things."

"When will you have something definite?" Drakken asked.

"Later this evening, perhaps..." the herbalist paused. "Tomorrow morning to be sure."

The half-dragon turned to go, a curse on absent-minded clerics already coming to his lips. When the herbalist asked him if he had uncovered anything in his own investigations, Drakken nearly didn't stop. Something in the cleric's voice, however, held him there.

Taking a deep breath, Drakken faced the inquisitive herbalist and relayed what he had discovered in Arranoth's room. He surprised himself, however, when he did not mention the mysterious note.

The half-dragon's surprise deepened when Phenotar asked to see the wool swatch. The herbalist studied it for a moment and grabbed the magnifying lens. With the fingers of one hand he spread out the wool fibers and peered intently at them through the instrument.

Drakken held his breath, for a moment all anger forgotten.

"Hmmm ... hmmm..." said the herbalist after a moment. "A very fine dye, but not local. It is difficult to get this depth of saturation and this color with the indigenous plants we have here. I seem to remember..." The cleric paused, drumming long, stained fingers against the table in obvious thought. "Yes," he said after another moment. "There was a merchant — Valerix I think his name was. He came to the abbey several months ago seeking an ongoing agreement to supply us throughout the year. He had several bolts of wool exactly this color."

Drakken sighed, cursing his luck. Whoever it was probably traded throughout the region. He'd never find him.

"Worst case of winter fever I'd ever seen," continued Phenotar.

"What?" Drakken nearly shouted. "You mean—"

"Yes," the herbalist said with a smile. "He's still here. Recuperating in the guest house until his caravan comes through here again."

Drakken offered his thanks to the cleric, any earlier anger forgotten in his desire to follow up on his next lead. The half-dragon took his leave and went in search of the recuperating merchant.

It didn't take him long. Smaller than the chapter house, the abbey guest house stood to the west of the Ilmatari chapel that served as the spiritual heart of the monastery. Its two-story stone frame offered shelter to weary travelers, sick villagers, and any who called upon the brothers for aid. A quick word to the guest master and Drakken discovered that Valerix took his morning repast each day in one of the house's

sitting rooms. The young cleric in charge of abbey hospitality led him through several short corridors, eventually stopping before an entryway covered by a thick blue curtain. Calling out a greeting, the guest master ushered Drakken through the curtain into an open, sunlit

room before taking his leave.

There, among a stack of dishes heaped with quail and plover eggs, thick bread, cold chicken, and crocks of various jellies, sat the most corpulent human he had ever seen. Bloated, splotchy flesh sagged around a nearly hairless head, running down the sides of the merchant's face to end in thick jowls. Scraggly, graying hair—glistening with grease from the morning's meal—erupted in a riot around thin lips. Bright red silks, so at odds with the muted colors worn by most of the abbey, bulged and flowed with the great mass of flesh that shifted as the merchant stood in greeting.

Drakken caught the man's look of surprise, which was just as quickly replaced by a cold, calculating gaze. The half-dragon felt as if he were being appraised for sale, and the feeling did little to improve a mood that seemed consistently sour.

"Valerix the merchant?" Drakken asked simply when the man had finally caught his breath from the exertion of standing.

The fat man lifted a bloated hand in response.

"At your service," he replied with an uncomfortable bow.

Sunlight reflected off a thick band of gold wedged tightly around one of the merchant's pudgy fingers. The ring glittered with nearly incandescent flame.

"It is a fine work of art, is it not?" Valerix asked, noticing the half-dragon's interest. "You have seen it before?"

He held it up. Two lines of gold, beaten and fashioned into the likeness of serpentine tails twined around each other to form the ring's shape. Drakken shook his head.

"No?" came the merchant's haughty reply. "Ah well, we are a large trading house. All of my associates wear such trinkets." ... and you are obviously of no consequence.

Drakken heard the unspoken message clearly. He felt the familiar anger coil tightly within him. Something about that fat human cried out for a bloody throttling. The half-dragon fought the impulse down. He felt as if he walked precariously on a tightrope—one false move would send him

tumbling into a sea of blood. He must be careful. If he had indeed killed Brother Arranoth, he wanted to make sure that no one else fell victim to his irredeemable evil. The merchant, however distasteful, may hold the secret to finding out exactly what happened. He was of no use to Drakken dead.

"I apologize for disrupting your meal," the half-dragon said at last in a tone that bespoke of anything but apology. "I need to ask you a question about Brother Arranoth."

Valerix raised his eyebrows at the mention of the murdered sub-prior.

"The brother recently killed?" he said, covering his mouth with fat, sausagelike fingers. "Whatever for?"

Drakken thought for a moment before answering, "We are gathering the sub-prior's belongings in order to sell them for those in need, and we had a question about a few of the articles we found."

The half-dragon gazed intently at the merchant, sure that the man had seen through that thin web of half-truth. If he had, however, the canny merchant gave no indication.

"I see," Valerix said, stroking his beard with indolent grace.

"How can I help?"

Drakken ignored the man's tone, which clearly indicated that it would be a waste of time. He reached into his robe and pulled out the purple wool swatch.

"Have you seen this before?" the half-dragon asked.

Valerix furrowed his brow, causing deep folds in the skin, as he examined the wool.

"Why, yes," he replied after a moment. "This is part of a sample of product that I give out to prove the quality of my wares. The swatch belongs to me."

"I see," Drakken replied. "Then can you tell me how it came to be in Brother Arranoth's room?"

The half-dragon couldn't quite keep the accusation out of his voice.

"That's easy," came the reply, no less pointed. "My

negotiations with Brother Brontheld, the Cellarer, were... let's just say that they were bearing little fruit. So I appealed to Brother Arranoth and offered him samples of my wares. It's that simple," the fat merchant nearly purred.

"Then you won't mind if I verify that with the Brother Cellarer himself?" Drakken asked.

"Of course not," Valerix waved at the half-dragon dismissively as he returned to his meal. "Now, if you don't mind...."

Drakken nearly took a step forward and grabbed the merchant by the collar so angry was he at being dismissed, but a disturbance in the courtyard distracted him. Even inside the guest house he could hear the buzz of many voices.

"Excuse me," he said abruptly, and left the merchant without another word.

The courtyard was a riot of activity. Brothers and servants stood in huddled clumps, chattering excitedly, or else they were running from wall to wall carrying baskets full of supplies.

"What's happening?" he yelled to a passing servant.

The woman stopped and turned to the half-dragon, terror written clearly on her face.

"Have you not heard? They've sighted ores, they have. In the hills not a day's ride from the abbey."

The news sent Drakken's heart pumping. Perhaps there was still something he could do.

Clearly, it was time to speak with the abbot.

A knock at the door pulled Drakken from his nightmares. He groaned and tried to roll over, to ignore the pounding on the door. Despite his best efforts, it continued—each blow resounding in the room like the hammer that would, finally, bind him in chains for the rest of his life. There was no escaping it. He had killed Brother Arranoth.

The pounding continued.

Drakken groaned and stumbled to his feet. His small cell lay

in ruins. Deep claw marks scarred the length of the stone wall, while a tangle of splintered furniture and torn clothing littered the floor.

Memory rushed in on him like a tidal wave. Despite three attempts to see the abbot, he had been unable to speak with Meremont. Each rebuffed attempt stoked the embers of his anger. Frustrated by his inability to participate in the abbey's defense, he had retired to his cell, falling at last into a fitful slumber from which he could not seem to wake.

Images plagued his every moment. The visions were immediate and terrible in their detail. It was as if Drakken wasn't merely reliving the horrifying event, but rather found himself trapped within the moment, tearing out the sub-prior's throat again and again.

Sometime near dawn, he had struggled free of his nightmarish prison, overcome with guilt and anger.

Rage over his obvious complicity in Arranoth's murder met with a deeper, burning hatred fueled in his heart. The beast within had slipped its bonds and he had lashed out at anything near him, until exhaustion drew him once more into sleep.

The knocking grew more insistent, penetrating the undertow of guilt brought by the evening's nightmares.

"What?" the half-dragon yelled as he pulled open the door, expecting the abbot and a host of his accusers.

Instead, he found a young novice in a simple white robe. The boy took a step back, eyes widening at Drak-ken's wild appearance.

"Brother Phenotar wants ... he wants to see you urgently," the novice's voice quavered.

When he arrived at the herbalist's workshop, Drakken followed the novice to a back room. The half-dragon was sure that everyone in the abbey knew of his guilt. He had felt their eyes upon him as they walked across the abbey close. Steeling himself, he entered the room, prepared for the worst.

Brother Phenotar barely acknowledged his entrance. The herbalist leaned intently over a figure lying on a broad table, running his fingers over something that looked suspiciously like a human arm. Drakken was about to shout his confession to the studious cleric when he realized that the arm belonged to Brother Arranoth.

The half-dragon began to shake, and was surprised when a voice somewhere within him began to curse him for his cowardice.

The herbalist, apparently, took no notice of his condition, but rather continued his examination.

"Take a look at this," Brother Phenotar said without preamble, indicating the sallow track of skin upon the corpse's arm. "Interesting, is it not?"

Drakken drew closer carefully, sure in his heart that the corpse would leap up and point damningly at its murderer.

"I don't... I don't see anything," he replied.

"Hmmm..." came the reply. "Yesterday I mentioned that I needed to study something further. The wounds to our departed brother's throat have bothered me from the beginning."

"Why?" Drakken asked, bending closer to the corpse despite himself.

"There did not seem to be enough bleeding for the severity of the wound." The herbalist tilted back the corpse's head, exposing the ruined wreck of its throat. "So, I did some further examination and I found this."

He indicated a small wound on the inside of the corpse's arm.

"What is it?" Drakken inquired.

"At first," Phenotar replied, "I thought it was a simple insect bite. But I ran some more tests. That's when I discovered that someone had poisoned Brother Arranoth.

"Adder's root," the herbalist added. "Very deadly."

"Then Arranoth was—" Drakken began.

"He was already dead when the wounds to the throat were made," Brother Phenotar finished. "I examined the throat wounds further and I discovered tiny slivers of metal. Whatever made the wounds wasn't natural."

Drakken felt his knees begin to buckle as relief flooded through him. He wasn't the one who'd killed the sub-prior! All of the hours of self-recrimination and hatred seemed like a dream. The Brother Herbalist's discoveries put a part of his mind at rest, while another part began to whirl with dark possibilities.

He stammered his thanks to Brother Phenotar and took his leave. If he hadn't killed the sub-prior, then

Brother Arranoth's murderer was still at large—and had gone to quite some length to incriminate him. Looking at the darkening spring sky, Drakken headed back to his cell. He had only a few hours to prepare for his meeting with whoever left that note.

—«Cfc—*

Drakken stood quietly in the Upper Cellar, one hand resting lightly on a stack of wooden crates, the other fingering a small set of prayer beads hanging from a belt loop sewn into his simple robe. Despite a bitter chill permeating the dank cellar, the half dragon's spirits were higher than they had been in months. Brother Phenotar's discovery had lifted a dark weight hanging upon his shoulders ever since he'd known of the sub-prior's death. Sure of his own innocence, Drakken could barely contain his relief. He only hoped that whoever had dropped him the mysterious note could shed some more light on Brother Arranoth's murder.

The half dragon was so wrapped up in speculation that he

only had a moment's warning before the attack. His keen sense of smell caught a faint musky scent an instant before two figures shimmered into existence before him. Sharpened steel arced toward him in the darkness, but the half-dragon had already begun to move, ducking beneath the whistling edge of one blade. As he turned, a second blade caught in the folds of his robe, slowing him down. He lashed out with a heavily muscled foot, catching one of his attackers in the gut. The assailant let out an explosive grunt and doubled over. Without hesitation, Drakken dived past the assassin and rolled to his feet.

Even in the tomblike darkness of the cellar, his dragon's vision caught sight of his attackers. Both were human. One, a beefy warrior who, by the look of him had once been an extraordinarily muscled man since gone to fat, wielded a wicked looking curved axe. His companion, a whipcord slim human with a well-groomed goatee, twirled a simple short sword in one hand and a hooked dagger in the other.

Despite the half-dragon's disadvantage, Drakken found his blood beginning to warm at the nearness of death. The beast slumbering deep within him began to awaken, and this time, he didn't fight it. In an instant, he knew what he would have to do. A low grumble escaped his lips as he launched himself at the smaller of the two assassins.

The man struck quick, a viperlike attack with the point of his short blade. Drakken didn't attempt to dodge, but almost seemed to leap onto the weapon. As the sword met thick scales, it bent slightly and slid to the side. Still moving forward, the half-dragon stepped slightly to the left of his assailant, grabbed the assassin's neck with a single clawed hand, and pulled the man to him as if in an embrace. In desperation, the screaming attacker sliced wildly with his dagger. Drakken let out a bellow of pain and rage as the blade cut through hardened scales as if they were silk.

Before he could finish his maneuver, however, the half-

dragon sensed the second assassin moving in for a solid strike. He spun, holding his captive before him like a shield. As the man's axe fell, it bit deep into the chest of the first assassin, shattering the hapless man's ribs as it ended its fateful arc.

The fat warrior took a step back, releasing the axe as his eyes widened in obvious horror. At that moment, Drakken pounced. Dropping the gurgling remains of his captive, he leaped forward. Batting away his opponent's feeble attempts at stopping him, the half-dragon wrapped two clawed hands around the man's neck and squeezed with frightful force. The assassin's

eyes bulged wildly moments before his windpipe collapsed between Drakken's scaled hands. Blood erupted from the warrior's mouth as he fell to the floor.

The half-dragon raised gore-encrusted hands before him and nearly roared with delight. The beast, he knew, was nearly free. He could feel it straining and pounding against the doors of its captivity. Drakken cast one last contemptuous look at the piles of meat before him—and froze as he caught sight of a familiar shape around the finger of the sword-wielding assassin.

He knew at once who was behind the murder of Brother Arranoth, and the knowledge quelled the wild anger within him. Not caring if anyone stumbled upon the two corpses, Drakken bounded up the stairs in search of the murderer.

Somewhere deep within him, the beast raged!

He emerged into chaos.

Despite the late hour, gray-cowled brothers scuttled to and fro, muttering prayers to Illmater as they carried buckets of water, heavy bags filled with grain and flour, and sundry other items. Drakken even caught the glint of steel, illuminated by the soft moonlight, among several of the abbey servants.

"Scouts spotted the humanoid horde outside the abbey gates," he heard some of the brethren say to one another.

Still others said, "The ores were already in the abbey cellars."

The half-dragon ignored it all, intent on his quarry. In the near pandemonium, he found it easy to slip by bands of abbey residents excitedly pursuing their specific tasks. No one accosted Drakken as he made his way to the guest house. A brief search of the guest

master's logbook revealed the information he needed. Within moments he stood before a simple wooden door. Briefly, he thought about knocking, but a memory of Brother Arranoth's face, locked in the rigor of death, flashed in his mind. The door cracked and shattered beneath his blows.

He entered the room like a whirlwind, tossing silk blankets, richly woven clothing, and stacks of ledgers in his search. He knew what he sought would have to be there somewhere. Not caring about the noise he made, Drakken began rifling through cedar chests, dumping the contents on the floor. The half-dragon's frustration mounted as the moments went by without any discovery. A cold seed of doubt began to sprout within his mind. What if he was mistaken?

And yet he kept on searching, leaving a trail of destruction in his wake. Finally, he reached the simple straw bed in the corner of the room. Angrily, he tore off the bedding, sending old straw reeds spilling to the floor. He was about to crack the whole bed frame when he caught sight of a small slip of paper among the reeds. He nearly shouted with triumph as he looked at the familiar neat lines of Brother Arranoth's handwriting.

It is clear to me now that Valerix has some deeper purpose for staying at the abbey than mere commerce. I have suspected for some time that he may be a dragon cultist, but today I discovered proof. I must tell Brother Abbot immediately upon his return from the village. I only hope I am in time.

Drakken's hands nearly shook as he read the missing journal entry. Valerix ... a cultist! It began to make some sense. He

would return to the abbot and—

The sound of hands slowly clapping behind him froze the half-dragon in place.

"Well done my scaled friend," the merchant's familiar voice seemed to echo in the room. "Well done, indeed."

Drakken turned to face the voice. Valerix the merchant stood in the entryway to the room, his corpulent face covered in a sheen of greasy sweat. The man's lips were pursed in a half pout.

"I see that you managed to survive the meeting with my associates," Valerix said. "A shame really, but I suppose it was to be expected."

The half-dragon took a step forward, the question already forming on his lips: "Why did you—?"

"Oh, come now," the merchant interrupted, his voice wheezing. "Surely you're not that stupid, are you? You've read Arranoth's journal. He's right. I was sent here by the Cult of the Dragon to see how things were progressing with Foilsunder—and I discovered you."

"Arranoth," he continued, waving pudgy fingers in the air, "simply got in my way."

Drakken took another step forward, baring his teeth.

"I will kill you myself," the half-dragon nearly roared—the beast was lashing out at its cage once again.

"Ah, I might watch my temper, if I were you," Valerix lectured, a sneer evident upon his sagging face.

"What do you know of it," the half-dragon growled. His fingers twitched with the urge to tear apart the smug man's body. Drakken felt his hold upon himself weakening, and he knew with a terrible certainty that if he gave in to the rage rising within him, he would lose himself completely.

"More than you could ever imagine," the cultist replied. "The men I hired were supposed to dump another body in the cellar, murdered like Arranoth. I thought that might be enough to break you, to push you over the edge. But when you paid me a surprise visit the

other day, I knew you were getting too close."

"So you sent them to kill me," Drakken stated.

Valerix shrugged, the motion sending ripples of bloated flesh bobbing beneath his silk robe.

"It seemed like the thing to do at the time."

"And now?" the half-dragon asked.

"If you kill me, we'll still win," Valerix replied, sweat dripping down from the wide expanse of his forehead.

"How?" Drakken nearly shouted the question.

"You feel it within you, don't you?" replied the merchant.

"That sweet, delicious madness. Like a fever in the blood. It goads you, doesn't it?"

Drakken took a step back, horrified by the truth in the cultist's words. The man's eyes shone with a feverish light.

"Why do you let these damned clerics treat you like a servant?" Valerix continued. "They have tried to make you what you are not. Kill them. They deserve to die. Unleash your anger. Let it go. You've kept it within you for too long."

Drakken shook his head in denial, but in his heart he knew that Valerix was right. For just a moment, he saw the broken bodies of the Ilmatari, dead at his hand. He felt no remorse or guilt, but rather a deep sense of satisfaction. Then he remembered who it was who had taken him in when he was lost and alone. He remembered, too, the fact that the man before him had poisoned the only friend he really had in the world.

The vision ended.

With a growl, he took a step toward the sweating cultist. When the man squealed like a pig being butchered, Drakken found himself smiling.

At that moment, the monastery bells began to ring.

"Ahh," the cultist blubbered, "it appears... it appears that the ores have breached the abbey gates. You'll have to make a choice now. Take your revenge and kill me j ...or... or save your brothers from certain death." 1

The bells rang with renewed urgency, and even from | the

guest house Drakken could hear the screams. He 1 hesitated for a moment, then with a roar that shook < the room, he pushed the cultist out of the way and ran toward the abbey gates.

"Farewell, my friend," Valerix called after him in a sneering voice. "I doubt we shall meet again."

The half-dragon ignored him.

When he arrived at the gates, he found the courtyard strewn with the bodies of ores, goblins, and humans alike. A group of Ilmatari were backed against a wall as a band of ores pressed in. Drakken grabbed a pitted sword from a corpse and charged forward, yelling his defiance.

The beast was fully awake inside him, all but out of its cage. Three bounding steps brought him in the midst of the ores. He swung the ancient sword with all the force of his anger. Two other blades cracked beneath the blow as the ores erected a hasty defense. With another swing, he gutted an axe-wielding ore and ducked beneath the wild swing of another opponent.

He would have cleaved the heads of two other ores except that a goblin darted forward and threw a weighted net, tangling Drakken's legs. The half-dragon stumbled slightly, giving the other ores an opening. Three glowing spears pierced his chest with enough force to knock him back a few steps.

Red rage crested through him like a vast wave, carrying his pain, anger, and madness. He let out a roar and it changed, deepened, as the Rage spilled out of him in a single acidic blast. He watched in delicious satisfaction as the band of ores before him fell back before the acid, skin sloughing off bone like melting

ice. With a strangled groan, the remaining ores fled, leaving sizzling flesh behind.

With a triumphant roar, he snapped the wooden hilts of the spears imbedded in his chest and turned to survey the foolish humans cowering before him. He was free at last!

Free of their damned meddling, their concern, and most of all, their damnable prayers. He took a step toward them, ignoring the blood streaming from his wounds. With a single, painful motion he tore off the gray cloak, delighting in the feel of chill wind on hardened scale.

Another step brought him face to face with the cleric standing in the front of the others. He wasn't cowering. The man stood before Drakken with his head held high, one arm held back as if protecting the others. Anger coursed through the half-dragon's veins.

This one, he thought, will pay for his insolence.

A single swipe of his clawed hand raked the offending cleric's face, sending him to his knees. Drakken stepped forward, intent on snapping the cleric's neck, but when the cleric looked up, the half-dragon saw the eyes of another old man, someone who, even in the midst of his madness, he remembered.

Time froze with that memory. He stood there with his hands poised to strike, gazing into eyes that were not simply eyes, but mirrors, reflecting his own soul.

This is not me/a voice from somewhere deep within the madness screamed.

This is you, the eyes seemed to say. And it is this that I love.

Drakken would have fled before the reality of that love, but his feet were rooted to the ground. Beneath the weight of that unyielding gaze he realized that for the past five years he had been running from himself, trying to be something that he wasn't. He looked upon the beast in all of its power, and he knew that he would

never truly be free of it if he kept trying to lock it away. He and the beast were one. In the end, all he could do was let it go.

At once, the pain of his wounds became too great to stand. The half-dragon fell to his knees before the wounded form of Abbot Meremont.

"Forgive me," he whispered as a bubble of blood appeared

on his lips.

"You are forgiven, my son," the abbot said, laying a bloodied hand upon Drakken's face.

And so, on a chill spring night, with three spears piercing his heart, Drakken Thaal yielded to love and gave himself up to a mystery older even than the gods. He toppled to the ground.

Finally at peace.

HOW SHARPER THAN A SERPENT'S TOOTH

Dave Gross

25 Ches, the Year of Rogue Dragons

Act I

"Because..." said Talbot Uskevren, his voice rising with each syllable until it echoed throughout the Wide Realms playhouse, "... we... dorit ...do... commissions!"

Mallion retreated so quickly that Ennis had to grab him before he fell backward off stage. Sivana flinched at the force of Talbot's outburst, and Presbart closed his eyes and grimaced. Not since his father's death had Talbot lost his temper so badly. He feared the worst, but a glance at the clenched fist he had been shaking at Mallion showed that his hands, at least, still appeared completely human.

Thank Tymora for small favors. His fellow players knew all too well that, despite

appearances, the leader of their troupe was never completely human. It had been over two years since Talbot had become a werewolf—far more than a werewolf—but in that time he had learned to master the change, even when the moon was full. In moments of great anger, however, it was hard not to let the black beast emerge.

Talbot opened his hands and relaxed his big shoulders. He considered apologizing but knew that would only weaken his position, morally if not legally. He remained the majority shareholder of the playhouse, so any decision was dependent upon his approval, but he did not want to lose any of his company, especially his fellow owners. They had

been nibbling at him for tendays on the same matter, and he supposed that it was at last time to have it out. He waited for Mallion to speak again, since he was the instigator.

Mallion looked at Sivana for support, but she shrugged and looked to Presbart. As the eldest player in the company, one who had traveled the Realms with Mistress Quickly long before she established the playhouse in Selgaunt, Presbart enjoyed an air of authority that far outweighed his relatively few shares in the company. As patiently as if he were merely considering what to eat for supper, the old thespian stroked his mustache and pretended not to have noticed Sivana's prompting gaze.

Sivana turned instead to Ennis. The hulking player was almost as big as Talbot, but unlike Talbot's, his dim appearance was not, alas, deceiving. He looked curiously back at Sivana until a dopey smile creased his face. He loved her, as did all the company, and he would gladly support her in any argument, but Ennis would do the same for any other friend, making him useless in an argument among the players.

With a sigh, Sivana finally crossed her arms and turned back to Mallion.

"Don't look to us, my bonny lad," she said. Since the death of the troupe's former leader, the younger actress had picked up many of Quickly's quaint expressions. "You are the one who found a patron."

"W/ia£?" Talbot's voice shook the timbers of the playhouse's new roof, a creaky flat cone that shielded the open yard from the rain while leaving a ring of open space between its edges and the eaves of the original circular building. The resident tasloi shrieked and swung through the rafters to their nest in the "heavens" above the stage. Even Lommy, the diminutive father of the clan of jungle creatures, who had been listening to the discussion from the edge of the balcony, pulled his pointed green head back from view as Talbot rumbled, "I never said you could solicit—"

"She approached him" offered Presbart.

His smooth and reasonable tone blunted Talbot's ire. No one could shout back at the distinguished player of kings and high priests, but Talbot raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"It's true!" insisted Mallion. "She liked what she had seen of our performances this spring. In fact, she specifically mentioned your role in AzounP

"It's true," said Sivana.

Her hair was just coming back in from having shaved it for their previous production, but she had already dyed it grass green, perpetuating the eternal speculation on her original color.

"And just what did you tell her about our policy?" said Talbot.

" 'We don't do commissions,'" Mallion replied, not quite mocking Talbot's tone, which was fortunate for him, Talbot thought.

"Good," said Talbot. "Great! Then it's settled. Let's get back to work."

He hopped down from the stage and went back to the stack of lumber they had bought to repair the roof. Since the rainproof enchantment over the previously open roof had expired, the shareholders built a conical shelter over the yard rather than pay the wizard's exorbitant fee. Unfortunately, they had since learned that the constant repairs and the need for continual flame spells to light the stage were almost as dear as the spellcaster's price.

"But why is that?" asked Ennis,

Despite his thirty-odd years and three hundred pounds, Ennis sounded like a querulous child when perplexed.

"Why what?" said Talbot.

"Why don't we do commissions?"

Talbot laughed, but soon he realized he was the only one laughing. The other players were staring at him with their arms crossed, their eyebrows raised.

"We all know why" he said, moving the lumber from the

ground to the stage so as not to look his fellows in the eye.
"You tell him, Sivana."

Sivana sniffed and said, "Well, I might once have said it was to preserve our reputation, but considering what everyone in Selgaunt is saying about Azoun and The Rose...."

"Never mind that," said Talbot. He didn't appreciate the reminder that the past few productions at the Wide Realms had become fodder for the most vicious gossips among the nobility. While The Uninvited Rose was indeed a hackneyed comedy that made none of the players proud, Talbot was pleased with Azoun, a tragedy in which he had finally played a title role. Unfortunately, the critical tongues of the gossips were sharper than the fangs of the wyrm that had slain the king of Cormyr.

"There are plenty of other reasons," Talbot said, nodding affirmatively at Ennis. "Tell him, Mallion."

"Tell him what?" said the actor. He had just passed thirty years and was beginning at last to look his age. In truth, Talbot was often jealous of the older actor, whose good looks and natural talent made him the obvious choice to play the lead in most plays. "I can think of no reason not to accept a commission when our treasury is so poor and attendance dwindles by the day."

"What's the matter with you? It is a matter of artistic integrity!" insisted Talbot. "We can't have some dilettante hiring our troupe to satisfy his own vanity. Presbart agrees with me. Don't you?"

Presbart made a study of his fingernails, but as it became increasingly clear that the others would not look away from him, he sighed and said, "It would be far easier to take your part, dear boy, if I had dined somewhere more elegant than a street cart this month."

"If we wanted a life of security," said Talbot, "we'd all be coin-counters, wouldn't we? The player's life is full of adventure, and sometimes that means a few lean months. Listen, even after buying these supplies, there's still a little

left from my shares. Maybe it's time for a summer bonus all around."

"It's not about the shares, Talbot," said Sivana. "You and Ennis spend more time repairing the playhouse than rehearsing with the rest of us. It's beginning to tell in the shows—even the fight scenes."

"That's true," said Ennis.

Talbot thought immediately of a once-thrilling fight that had degenerated into unfunny slapstick in their last performance of Azoun.

"Shut up," he told Ennis.

He winced to hear himself snap. There was no point taking out his irritation on Ennis, of all people.

"She said she chose us because she liked you as Azoun," said Mallion.

"She said that? Exactly who is this worn-?" Talbot smelled a rat. "Say, if you think a little flattery will change—"

"That's what she said," said Sivana. "He is the very image of a king," I think were her words. Believe me, we were as surprised as you are."

"She did not even appear to be drunk," offered Mallion.

"Maybe she fancies him," suggested Ennis, grinning.

"Well," said Talbot, "I suppose it couldn't hurt to hear her out before explaining to her that we do not accept commissions."

"That's the spirit," said Sivana.

Mallion clapped Talbot on the arm and said, "You won't regret this."

Act II

She arrived just after dawn, when Talbot was the only one left awake in the playhouse. Talbot had spent the night finishing the thrones intended not for the actors but for guests willing to pay a premium price for a seat directly on the stage, where everyone could see them. It was a custom that had lapsed since the days of Mistress Quickly's management, and he hoped to parlay a few days of his labor

—and the vanity of his fellow nobles—into enough hard currency to pay for the next production's costumes.

Lommy had wrangled his brood back up into their nest after they had spent the wee hours leaping from rafter to rafter, practicing by instinct the locomotion they would have needed had they been born in the jungles from which their parents had been stolen. While Lommy served as one of the troupe's favorite clowns, his mate, Otter, and their offspring were the only permanent residents of the Wide Realms playhouse. And as long as Talbot had a stake in it, they would be welcome there. All night long, the nocturnal creatures had kept him company with their chatter as they bounded through the playhouse. They were already more facile with human language than their pidgin-speaking sire, but with their mother they communicated only in the clicks and shrieks of their kind.

After they had quieted, Talbot set aside his hammer lest he keep the youngsters awake. He was debating between scoring the leather upholstery and staining the wood when he felt the hair on his nape rise. He had learned to trust that feeling since the Black Wolf awoke within him, and he tensed as he turned to face the main entrances.

He smelled her before he saw her. The scent of her body was dry, warm, and spicy, with a hint of some foreign incense, but he realized instinctively that she wore no perfume but her own natural musk.

When he saw no one at either of the ground floor entrances, Talbot looked up to see her standing on the mezzanine. The woman stood so still that at first she appeared like a statue over which someone had thrown a dark crimson cloak. Even from thirty feet away, he could feel the warmth of her body, and the morning gloom did nothing to diminish the luster of her hair. It might have been a wig of gold wire as the ladies of the Old Chauncel fancied, but its strands were far too fine and light where they floated above her shoulders like wheat chaff soft-lifted by a summer breeze.

Talbot realized he was sweating, and some invisible force broke over him like warm air in the cool, damp morning. Whatever the nature of the woman's aura, it made his body yearn toward her even as his most primal intuition tickled at his brain to flee. She was powerful.

"Mnomene," she said.

Talbot gaped, realized he was gaping, and shut his mouth.

"My name is Mnomene," she clarified. "You are Talbot Uskevren, the playwright?"

No one had ever called him a playwright before, at least not outside of a joke. He had never written a complete work by himself, for the Wide Realms typically purchased its plays before adapting them to their particular strengths: sword fights and broad humor. It had given the troupe an unfortunate reputation: "As actors, they are excellent fighters," was the common jibe. While the other players winced at the backhanded compliment, Talbot was secretly pleased that his fellows had become, under his tutelage, nearly as famed as Master Ferrick's students of the blade.

"Yes," he said. "I am he."

Mnomene stepped closer to the railing, and Talbot saw that she was smiling. He blushed, thinking her smile aimed at his self-consciously correct grammar, but he could not look away from her golden skin, smooth and flawless as a fresh-minted coin.

"You are the man I need," she said, and his next heartbeat was a prayer to Sune that it was true. Mnomene, however, turned immediately to business. "Craft me a tragedy to break a miser's heart, perform it each night for three rides, and I will match your receipts for the duration."

It was a good offer. Even with poor attendance, a guaranteed match of receipts would do much to recoup the year's losses. His previous protests all but forgotten, Talbot almost agreed at once, but years of his father's unwelcome lessons had left an indelible impression on his brain. No matter how hard he had striven to avoid the fate, his parentage demanded that

he would always be, in part, a coin-counter.

"Match the receipts for a full house," he said. "Plus expenses for all costumes, sets, and props. And we will discuss the details."

It was Mnomene's turn to gape. She recovered smoothly, smiling down at Talbot with an expression of dawning respect. He noticed then that she was very tall, and her neck was as long and as elegant as a swan's.

"I will guarantee half the house," she countered. "And I must approve all of the costumes, sets, and props if I am to cover their cost. Also, you must always reserve the finest seat in the house for my guest."

Talbot nodded as he walked toward the base of the gallery. The edge of the mezzanine rail was twelve feet from the floor, but he leaped straight up and over it to land on the wooden floor. One of the advantages of being the Black Wolf was that he enjoyed all the beast's strength even in human form, but he was disappointed to see neither surprise nor particular admiration for his stunt in Mnomene's expression.

"You will be wanting plenty of fight scenes," he said hopefully.

"If you think that will draw a bigger audience, then by all means," she said. "I want the largest possible audience, and for word of the play to travel far and wide. The details I leave to you, so long as you craft the drama around this scheme." She handed a roll of vellum pages sealed with gold-flecked red wax.

Talbot accepted the scroll and broke the seal. His fingers tingled as he unrolled the pages and scanned the outline. As he read, Mnomene perched upon the mezzanine rail, graceful as a bird upon a branch. Each time Talbot glanced up to see her watching him, he felt a warm flush upon his face. Nonetheless, he could not resist continued glimpses.

"This has... potential," he said at last.

"It needs an artist's touch," said Mnomene. She slipped down from the rail and put a hand on his arm.

"This King Krion," he said. "He could make quite a tragic hero."

"No," said Mnomene. "Do not try to make a hero of him. He is a miserly old fool, blind to the qualities of his offspring."

She did not raise her voice, but Talbot felt the heat of her body rise as she gripped his arm with surprising strength. He realized she was taller than any woman he had ever met, only a handspan shorter than he.

"That may be, my lady," he said. "Yet an audience must find something sympathetic about him, or the play will not move them."

Mnomene hesitated, considering.

"They must be moved," she agreed. "But they must see his greed, too, and know that he is wrong to withhold his treasury from the prince and princesses."

"Well," said Talbot, "it would help if the children were not all so innocent. Perhaps if two of them schemed to inherit his fortune alone, leaving the other with nothing..."

She frowned at the suggestion but then slowly nodded.

"That could do, so long as the youngest daughter remains true. She must be our heroine."

Talbot looked down at her, finally feeling comfortable enough to smile as he might at a pretty barmaid.

"The youngest daughter, is it?"

Mnomene pushed back and released his arm, but then she offered her hand and said, "We have a bargain?" - Talbot imagined how Mallion would triumph at the news of his hasty capitulation to a situation he had so fervently opposed. It occurred to him that he had been smitten by Mnomene's beauty, but no one could say he had not made a fair bargain with her. He took her hand and felt its iron grip match the strength of his own.

Act III

Sivana spun through the air and hit the floor rolling until she slammed into the stage-right pillar with a bone-crunching impact. Above her head, Perivel's sword shook on its pins

where it hung as one of the set's permanent decorations. The massive blade Talbot inherited from his great uncle was far too dangerous to use in a stage fight, but Talbot kept it there both as an impressive decoration and as a handy weapon in case serious trouble ever returned to the Wide Realms.

Sivana glanced nervously up at the monstrous sword, rubbed her shoulder, and said, "Take it easy, big fellow!"

"Sorry," moaned Ennis, holding his quarterstaff gingerly, as if it had suddenly become hot to the touch.

Presbart took it away from him.

"Tal!" shouted Presbart. "We need you down here. This choreography needs work."

"The problem is not with the choreography," muttered Mallion, rubbing his chin with the back of his hand.

A bruise was already forming where Ennis had clipped him earlier. Behind Mallion, two junior players clutched their elbows.

Ennis slumped his shoulders and hung his head. He had been exceptionally clumsy ever since meeting Mnomene. It was worst when she was present, but even a day after her last visit to consult with Talbot, her aura lingered, inspiring almost all of the actors to greater fervor. Everyone wished to please their new patron—everyone except the tasloi, who scurried into

their nest above the stage whenever she arrived, and Presbart, who became uncharacteristically quiet in her presence. The old actor had even seemed ready to protest the commission—a futile gesture, once Talbot and any one other shareholder decided to support it—until he saw the coffer full of gems she offered as initial payment on the work.

Talbot looked down from the upper gallery, where he had made a desk between the benches so he could work in the fresh air near the gap between the roofs. Throughout the rehearsal, he had paid scant attention to the battle scene in

which the king's disgraced but loyal retainer fought the soldiers of the treacherous prince and princess. Usually Talbot's greatest pleasure was in directing those scenes, but for the first time he found himself absorbed in the text.

When he saw that no one was bleeding or unconscious, Talbot waved his quill absently and said, "You take care of it, Mallion. This dialogue between Krion and Nesme needs more work."

"Come on, Tal," complained Sivana. "You have been saying the same thing about every scene with them. It's good enough, which is more than I can say for this battle."

"It is rather good," said Presbart.

That got Talbot's attention, since Presbart was notoriously critical of any text they performed, even those bought from real playwrights.

"I think Tal just wants any excuse for more 'story conferences' with Mnomene," said Ennis.

His grin evaporated when he saw Sivana scowling at him and hefting a practice sword, vengeance in her eyes.

Tal set aside the quill and spilled sand upon the page he had been writing. "Very well," he sighed.

He stood up and stretched until the bones in his neck popped. Then he spun down around the support beam to land on the mezzanine rail, from which he leaped out in a somersault to land in a swashbuckling posture on the stage.

Applause from a lone viewer came from the ground entrance. All of the other players turned to see Mnomene approach, but Talbot had scented her moments earlier.

"What a show-off!" Sivana stage-whispered.

Talbot's heightened senses no longer fooled any of the regular players.

Talbot shot Sivana a glare. Yes, he had been showing off, but he did not want it to be so obvious, especially to Mnomene.

"Welcome, my lady. We did not expect you until tomorrow," he said. "Unfortunately, I have not finished with the revisions."

"That is quite all right," she said, gesturing gracefully to the gallery above. "Are they upstairs?"

"Yes, but they are not ready to—" Before he could finish, Mnomene had already levitated up to the gallery to land gracefully beside his makeshift desk, where she began perusing the new pages.

"I told you she was a sorcerer," whispered Mallion.

Talbot shrugged. His brother was a sorcerer, too, though no one had known it until recently. His own family members were so far beyond eccentric that Talbot practically expected anyone who entered his life to be some sort of magician, monster, or otherworldly visitor.

He didn't even wonder which one Mnomene might be as he looked up at her reading the pages. He hoped only that she would approve of the additional changes he had made. They were not exactly what she had requested the last time they'd conferred.

"All right, troupe," said Talbot, turning back to the assembled players. "Let's figure out this fight. I am the seneschal this time. Ennis, watch me."

They drilled for half an hour as Mnomene read. Try as he might, Talbot could not help glancing up to the gallery for some indication of her reaction. Her face was a study in stoicism as she read through the new fourth act and went on to the conclusion. Once Talbot saw her hand rise involuntarily to her mouth, as if she found something shocking. He knew at once what she had read, and he turned back to the fight work lest she catch his eye.

Talbot turned over the seneschal's role to Ennis, who got it right the first time. They did it again, faster, and faster again. As the rest of the company joined in by twos and fours, Presbart and Talbot walked away to view the scene from the groundlings' view.

"Nice," said Presbart.

Talbot nodded and said, "She was just the inspiration we all needed."

"Maybe to you," he said, "but she is much more of a distraction to the rest of us. Do you not realize what Ennis needed today?"

"Just an example," said Talbot.

"That is correct," said Presbart. "But not of the sword play."

Talbot looked down at the neat little man. To be fair, he was not particularly little, but everyone at the playhouse except Ennis—and Mnomene—seemed small since Talbot's late, and continuing, growth spurt.

"What are you getting at?" Talbot asked.

"When Quickly led the troupe," said Presbart, "she was more than just our employer. She was like a—"

"Pardon my intrusion," said Mnomene. She had floated down from the gallery too quietly and too quickly for Talbot to smell her approach. "Perhaps you can explain why you have given all of Nesme's lines to this fool character."

"I think I hear my dear old mother calling," said Presbart, holding a cupped hand to his ear and retreating to the stage.

"Well," said Talbot, "it seemed to me that the basic problem between Nesme and Krion is that they never tell each other what they truly feel."

"Go on."

"So if she is the one who explains that she loves him, how can we believe that he continues to refuse her?"

"Because he is a greedy old man who does not admit he is wrong!"

"Right!" said Tal. "But why is he wrong? What goes wrong between them?"

Mnomene frowned and said, "Nothing goes wrong between them. He is the only one who is wrong. It is all his fault."

"But that makes him just a bad king, a bad father. In your outline, he was a great hero once. There must be something of that greatness still in him, only his children cannot see it."

"But he can't see that they love him."

"That is it exactly! He cannot say the things he feels, nor can Nesme unfold her heart to him. That's why the fool is there to tell him the truth, only he cannot believe it, since it comes from the mouth of a jester."

"So..." said Mnomene, "by the time he realizes the truth..."

"It is too late," said Talbot. "Because she has died first."

"What?"

Mnomene shuffled the pages to find the final scene.

"Oh," said Talbot. "I thought you'd finished it."

Her eyes widened as she read the final pages. "You killed her!"

"You said you wanted something 'to break the heart of-'"

"No, no," she said, her finger tracing the dialogue down the final page. "You were right. This is terrible. I mean this is perfect. Let me see this scene."

"Well, Presbart hasn't read it yet."

"Then you play Krion."

"Oh, no," said Talbot. "Presbart is the better choice, I assure you."

"These are your words, are they not?"

"Well, mostly," said Tal. "Yes. The others always add-"

"Then it is decided," said Mnomene. "Just as you played Azoun, I want you to play King Krion."

Act IV

Presbart did not object to trading the role of king for that of fool. In fact, the entire company seemed smugly satisfied that Talbot had taken another title role, and he might have wondered why if he didn't spend every waking hour practicing his lines and revising the text. Rehearsals continued for another month, and soon the junior players took it upon themselves to boast in fes-thalls and taverns that audiences could look forward to something special with the new production.

King Krion opened with only half the house filled, a respectable showing compared to the past year's attendance. But by the third night the gatekeepers had to

turn away more than fifty people, including nobles willing to stand after the gallery seats were sold out. The next night, Talbot doubled the price of the gallery and throne seats, yet still they turned away nearly a hundred.

The Wide Realms had never known such success. But while the rest of the company spilled out of the playhouse each night to hold court in the Green Gauntlet or the Black Stag, Talbot remained at the Wide Realms, where he and Mnomene dissected the evening's performance over a copy of the play and a bottle of Usk Fine Old, the favored vintage of Talbot's late father.

"I still do not like to watch the torture scene," said Mnomene. "It is so repulsive! Does he really need to throw the jelly eyes to the groundlings?"

"Ah, but the reaction was perfect. I tell you, the crowd loves a little gore."

Mnomene tried and failed to suppress a smile.

"All of Selgaunt heard those screams," she said, "which is why they will be gathering at the gate by midday tomorrow."

"So, are you pleased?"

"Aye," said Mnomene.

She stared over Talbot's shoulder, toward the empty thrones on the stage still stained with stage blood. The one Talbot had reserved for her guest had remained empty every night, despite the complaints of nobles who wanted to buy it. Talbot never thought of asking Mnomene to release it. Unless he was sorely mistaken, Mnomene's play was ultimately intended for an audience of one.

By the middle of the second tenday, Talbot's mother and brother arrived to see the play. Tamlin at first pretended to be offended that his brother had not reserved him the throne seats, but then he praised the show in tones so sincere that Talbot tensed, suspecting mockery. He was surprised when Tamlin embraced him before leaving the playhouse.

"I had no idea you and father were so close," said Tamlin. "I

envy you, my big little brother."

Only their sister had called Talbot by that childhood nickname, but it was the emotion in Tamiris voice that choked him up. Talbot knew that they both mourned a father he had never really known, but perhaps he had come to understand something of the man in learning the role of King Krion.

The house was filling the night Mnomene's guest arrived.

The crowd parted for him as they would for the Overmaster of Sembia, though the guest approached without herald or fanfare. His robes were more golden thread than silk, and his slippers seemed to be composed entirely of red and black gemstones, though they appeared as supple as lambskin and attracted not one fleck of mud as he tread over the damp ground. His hair and beard were silver-shot gold. Talbot recognized him immediately; he could be only Mnomene's father.

He did not pay as he passed the turnstile, but Ennis made no move to stop him. The big fellow only gaped at the imperial figure as he entered the playhouse and walked with stately assurance to the reserved seat, as if it truly was a throne. As the man sat, the hush over the playhouse was dispelled, and the typical hubbub filled the vast space.

Talbot found Mnomene peering at the man from the edge of the stage. She seemed eager and nervous.

"Your guest arrives at last," he said.

She nodded and withdrew from the stage.

"No matter what happens tonight," she said, "I wish to thank you."

"What do you mean," said Talbot, " 'Whatever happens tonight'?"

"Here," she said. "For luck."

She pressed a ruby into his hand and kissed him on the cheek.

Dizzy from the kiss, Talbot hesitated as she turned to walk briskly through the backstage area toward the gallery stairs.

Shed almost escaped before he called out, "Luck for what? What's going to happen?"

Mnomene paused and looked back over her shoulder.

"I will watch from the gallery," she said. "It is best if he does not look upon me." "Mnomene!"

"Just remember, this is your house, and he is a guest here."

She gave him one last, nervous smile, murmured a word of sorcery, and vanished.

"Dark and empty," cursed Talbot.

"What's wrong?" said Sivana, emerging from the prop room beneath the stage.

She wore half of her costume and held the rest under her arm along with Talbot's kingly robes and crown. Mallion was right behind her in the garb of the prince.

"Nothing," said Talbot. "I hope."

His hope did not last long after the play began.

In the opening scene, as King Krion, Talbot demanded that his children declare their devotion to him before dispensing their inheritances. Mallion's prince honored his father's martial conquests and promised to take up his arms in eternal defense of his realm. To him Krion entrusted his armies and granted a paltry annual stipend.

"You set me to arms, sire, but arm me not," protested the prince.

Mnomene's father snorted derisively.

The elder princess, played by a pretty young actress Mallion had "discovered" in a local festhall, praised the king's wisdom and pledged tireless diligence in

overseeing justice in his kingdom. The king awarded her a magistrate's scepter and another paltry income.

"Judge them best who toil in economy, as you provide exemplar to their lives."

The groundlings hissed the niggardly advice, but Mnomene's father sneered.

"If you had matched her worth to her wits," he spat, "you should demand a return of your gift!"

At last, Sivana stood before the king as his beloved youngest princess. In response to his demand for praise, she promised love in the precise amount of the duty of a daughter, no more, no less.

"Ha!" barked the guest. "Nothing will come of nothing."

Talbot narrowed his eyes, thinking it unlikely that the man had guessed the very lines he was about to speak. He realized Mnomene's father must have observed the play before, clandestinely, and while the troupe did not object to the groundlings' reacting to the play, a heckler on the stage—especially a noble guest—could throw them.

Talbot forged again, his voice shifting almost involuntarily to mimic the guest's voice. "Nothing will come of nothing," he said, shaking a dire finger at the princess.

For the rest of the first act, the visitor said no more, but he shifted in his seat and coughed every time some character protested Nesme's innocence or implored King Krion to reason.

The trouble began when Krion banished his loyal seneschal.

"Ridiculous!" he barked, standing up to point at Talbot. "This is where it all goes inexcusably wrong. No such thing happened. Never!"

Presbart, in his motley and bells, sidled up to the man as if he were an attendant lord at Krion's court.

He had decades of experience dealing with hecklers, most of whom merely wanted to share the attention of the crowd.

"Can you not see, my lord?" he said, taking his arm to ease him back into the throne. "The king is mad!"

The visitor brushed him aside, and the other players continued, trying to ignore his outburst even as Ennis, at a nod from Talbot, changed direction in his retreat from Krion's court to stand near the belligerent guest. If he noticed Ennis's intention, the visitor made no show of it.

"Only this fool could think the wise man mad who measures his hoard against impudent, wanton youth!" The visitor strode toward Talbot, admonishing him with a wagging

finger. "And whose fool are you—?" with the most casual flick of his hand he shoved Ennis away as the big man reached for his arm—"to so abuse a good father in this pitiable pantomime?"

"For a heckler," observed Mallion, edging away from Talbot, "he's pretty good."

"Be at peace, my loyal subject," said Talbot.

He was not as smooth as Presbart at such improvisation, but he had to give it a try before tossing the man bodily from his stage. He raised his prop scepter and gestured for the guest to return to his throne

Undaunted, the guest slapped the scepter out of Talbot's hand.

"Where is she?" he demanded. "Mnomene, show yourself!"

"That is enough," Talbot growled at the man. "Get out."

"Who are you to order me, you mincing imitation of a man?"

He turned and called out to the gallery. "Mnomene, show yourself at once! This farce of yours is over."

"It has only just begun," cried Mnomene's voice from the upper gallery. She was either still invisible or else well hidden. "Everyone has seen for tendays what a callous miser you are."

"Listen, old man," said Sivana, coming up behind him. "You have had your fun, but the paying customers— oof."

She flew across the stage, just missing the pillar and crashing into the crowd with half a dozen groundlings. Their laughter turned nervous, for while they loved a good brawl, they could not understand the course of the sudden improvisation.

Talbot reached for him, but the visitor was already transforming. His gold-threaded robes shrank and merged into his flesh to form metallic scales while his arms stretched up, fingers splayed and forming wide golden wings even as a new set of taloned arms grew out of his sides and his legs turned to powerful haunches.

The groundlings' laughter turned to screams, and the

galleries rumbled with the sound of running feet.

The gold dragon continued growing. As he grew too tall to remain under the stage roof, he stepped out into the yard, scattering more groundlings as his wings twitched and snapped. He reached toward the gallery where Mnomene's voice had come, grabbed a support beam, and tore it away.

"Face me, child! Or I will tear apart this shack stick by stick."

"Face him, Mnomene! Face him!" yelled Mallion.

He drew his prop sword, looked at it, and threw the useless thing away before retreating from the dragon.

Talbot began his own transformation, feeling his robes tear down the back as his shoulders grew great and wide.

"Ennis, make sure Sivana's all right," he yelled while his throat was still human enough to articulate words.

"The rest of you, help everyone get out of here."

The dragon tore away the gallery railing and groped for his invisible prey. His scaly claw came away with a mass of splintered benches reduced to so much firewood. He trumpeted his anger and blasted a cone of fire into the seemingly deserted area.

"Show yourself, girl! Face me!"

"No, you great fool," roared Talbot from the stage. His voice had become a howl. "You face me!"

Only the barest scraps of his costume clung to his black furred body as he stood brandishing Perivel's sword in his clawed hand. Half-wolf, half-man, he stood as tall as an ogre, his body surging with the hot power of fury. Still, even on the stage, he stood barely as high as the dragon's gleaming thigh.

The dragon hesitated when he saw the Black Wolf at his knee.

"What a curious mammal," he said. "Do not stand between a dragon and his wrath."

"Stop wrecking my playhouse," roared Talbot, leaping. "And stop stepping on my lines!"

He swung the massive sword hard across the dragon's knee,

striking with the blunt of the blade. The blow sounded like the fall of a pillar in a marble hall, the report deafening the panicked few who still had not escaped the playhouse.

A huge stretch of wall ripped away in the upper gallery, and a smaller gold dragon appeared as her invisibility spell fell away. She looked fearfully at the big dragon and leaped away to fly over the houses of Selgaunt.

"You cannot escape me, rebellious child!"

For an instant, Talbot hoped the dragon would fly off after Mnomene, but the great drake hesitated, looking around at the playhouse.

"But first," he rumbled, reaching up to tear at the roof, "let us put a sure end to this despicable place."

"No!" Talbot howled.

The dragon raised a leg to kick Talbot, who rolled to the side, sprang up, and drove his sword through the dragon's foot and deep into the hard-packed earth of the playhouse floor. The dragon's bugling scream drowned out the human shrieks before it turned into fire that washed over the playhouse roof and spread over the thatching. Despite the wards against mortal fire, the thatched roof exploded into flame under the extraordinary heat.

The dragon pulled at its captured foot, but the thick crossbars pinned it to the floor. Talbot leaped up and climbed the dragon's thigh, raking his way up the golden body like a bear sharpening its claws on a tree.

"You listen to me, beast!"

The dragon snatched him up like a man might grab a mouse upon his tunic. Talbot pushed and strained against the gigantic grip, but the dragon held him fast and moved him close to his jaws, still smoldering from the heat of his flame.

"By what right in these wide realms do you command me, little wolf?"

Talbot felt his own rage rising like fire within his breast. He could surrender to it, let the fury consume his mind until he burrowed like a badger through the dragon's hand then

toward the furnace of his heart to seek vengeance, or die trying. Instead, just as his humanity teetered on the brink of savagery, he remembered Mnomene's last words to him, and he chose one last gambit as a man.

"I am your damned host," he shouted. "You have endangered my fellows, terrorized my patrons, and ruined my house. You, sir, have abused my hospitality!"

The dragon gnashed his jaws and snapped his snout closed. He snarled, hissed flame through his teeth, and squeezed Talbot so hard he felt his ribs grind together.

The dragon stared so hard at the little mammal in his hand that Talbot thought he might burst into flames under that gaze. At last, the dragon thrust Talbot down upon the stage and released him. As embers from the burning roof drifted down, the great dragon bowed his head.

"Perhaps..." said the dragon. "Perhaps I have been a bit rude."

Act V

Krion—as Talbot had come to think of the dragon—muttered a few grudging excuses and flew away the moment Talbot removed the sword from his foot. Talbot imagined the dragon was chasing after Mnomene once more, and he hoped he would catch up to his daughter in another city—any where but Selgaunt.

He stood alone in the smoldering remains of the Wide Realms, long after the fire brigade had left. He counted his blessings as he accounted the losses. The calculation was simple: Of the playhouse, total ruin. The foundations that survived the fire were not worth saving. Any rebuilding would have to begin from the ground up, and even the coin from King Krion was insufficient to begin such a grand project.

On the positive side of the tally, and more than a little miraculously, no one had died in the conflagration. Lommy and family had fled the moment they smelled Krion arrive, but they were homeless, as was the troupe. Even mounting a

new production of the popular play would be only a tiny first step toward rebuilding the Wide Realms. Innkeepers always kept fifty percent of the receipts, and they could accommodate only much smaller audiences.

If nothing else, Talbot thought, he learned that he, with a little help from his fellow players, could write

a play that would "break a miser's heart"... or at least really, really irritate him. More than that, though, Talbot had written a play that spoke to all sorts of people, from the groundlings to the snootiest members of the Old Chauncel, all while finally coming to grips with his own feelings about a father to whom he had said far too little in the time they had left.

"I suppose I should apologize," said Krion.

His nostrils full of smoke, Talbot couldn't smell the dragon approach. Krion was once more in human form, but he had given himself far more modest garb.

"Nothing says 'I apologize' like fifty thousand five-stars," said Talbot, estimating the amount he would need to begin rebuilding.

"That is a handsome sum," said Krion. "No doubt, were I to subject myself to your human laws, you might extract it from me through your courts. I have never understood how you mammals equate treasure with civility. As I said, I apologize "

Talbot did not correct him, and he tried not to entertain any notions about other ways in which he might extract the coin from the dragon. Even at his most furious, he was not insane enough to think that even the Black Wolf was a match for a gold dragon.

"I have had a notion," said Krion. "One that might serve us both in the long term. While the content was of dubious value, this notion of a play intrigues me."

"No," said Talbot.

"Now that you have had some experience with the collaborative process, and with a more mature patron guiding the story...."

"Oh, no," said Talbot. "If I've said it once, I've said it a thousand times."

"I am certain that your audience will appreciate my story of a monarch much abused by his ungrateful children."

"We...don't... do..."

"With that great big sword of yours," said Krion, "you did cut a rather kingly figure." "Did you really think so?" "Let's talk terms." "Fifty thousand fivestars." "Bah! Twenty."

"Plus another twenty for my assurance not to revive King Krion."

"What? That's extortion!"

"No, that's an annual, renewable stipend."

"You drive a mean bargain, wolf," said the dragon.

"Thank you," said Talbot. "I learned it from my father."

BEER WITH A FAT DRAGON

Don Bassingthwaite

Late Tarsakh, the Year of Rogue Dragons

The caravan moved slowly down the dusty slope and into the oasis, the sinking sun at the riders' backs throwing long shadows across scrub trees and coarse grass. Tuigan women watched the riders from benches outside round, felt-covered yurts while children raced about in the fading heat of the day, running alongside the caravan's horses, pack mules, and ox carts. A few of the caravan travelers laughed and threw trinkets to the boldest children, but Tycho Arisaenn threw smiles toward the watching women. Especially the pretty ones.

A young woman with a delicately squared face and the rich bronze complexion of the steppe tribes gave him a smile and lingering glance in return. As the caravan coiled to a stop beside one of the stones that marked the long route of the Golden Way east across the Endless Wastes, Tycho grinned at his companion.

"Only the women at home, Li!" he crowed. "The men must be out raiding!"

"It's strange they wouldn't leave some men behind to guard

the oasis." Kuang Li Chien tilted back the broad straw hat that had shaded him from the searing sun and scanned the oasis. His face darkened. "Mother of dogs," he muttered. "I know where we are. I remember this place from my journey west."

Tycho followed his gaze. Beyond the yurts of the Tuigan, an enormous pavilion sprawled on the edge of the muddy pond that was the oasis's heart. A large figure—a man as fat as any Tycho had ever seen—was just emerging from the door flap, one thick arm raised in greeting.

"Well met, thirsty travelers," he bellowed in a voice that carried across the entire oasis. "Come! Come and drink at Ong's tavern!"

"Tavern?" As the rest of the caravan let out a cheer, Tycho looked to Li. The Shou's expression was glum. "Li, we haven't seen anyplace that called itself a tavern since we left Almorel on the Lake of Mists. What's wrong with a tavern?"

"Look after your horse," Li said, sliding out of the saddle, "then come with me. You'll see what's wrong."

--QER—»

Tycho stepped through the door flap of the pavilion and was immediately engulfed by fetid warmth. The main chamber of the makeshift tavern was already crowded with the guards and passengers of the caravan. Some sat at rough tables, others on rickety chairs, but most lounged against heaped cushions of indeterminate age and color. All of them held vessels—earthenware mugs, waxed leather drinking jacks—and drank and laughed with a vengeance. Many of the women of the oasis were there as well, a few serving the tavern's customers, but many customers themselves, gathered in clusters to talk or around tables to play some boisterous game involving rune-carved bone tiles and a number of knives.

"Hoil" shouted the women around one table.

They snatched up cups and drank. Their knives, striking the

tabletop in an intricate rhythm, didn't miss a beat.

Charcoal braziers added to the heat. Fat dripped, sizzling and popping, from long skewers of meat onto the hot coals, the heavy smell of it fighting a valiant battle with the odors of smoke and bodies. Soot and grease from the braziers left a shiny coating on the fabric of the pavilion's walls. High in the folds of the roof, long strands of black grease swayed like noxious icicles. Stained carpets covered the ground, though they might have supported a small garden on the dirt mashed into them. Tycho's foot came down in a wet spot where something had been spilled and simply left to soak in. Tycho turned and glared at Li as the Shou followed him in.

"Sweet chum in a bucket, Li! Are you saying you don't like this place because it's dirty?"

Li shifted, as if longing for the heavy dao saber he had left back at the caravan's campsite, and said, "I don't like it because it's the most foul drinking house I have ever seen."

"Then I'll look forward to seeing the wine shops of Shou Lung. They must all be scrubbed out every night and painted fresh every morning."

He took a deep breath, savoring the smell of grilling meat and—

"Beer!" he gasped. "Blessed Lliira, a break from that foul horse milk drink the Tuigan make!" He captured two mugs from a passing serving woman and thrust one at Li. "Drink!" he ordered and drained his mug at a gulp.

The beer within was thin, sour, and studded with tiny, soft chunks that lodged against Tycho's throat and threatened to make him gag. Li gave him a gloating smile.

"Millet beer," the Shou said casually. "Brewed by the tavernkeeper in big goat skin bags."

"Pagh." Tycho stared at the residue that clung to the bottom of his mug and said, "It tastes like the goats are still inside them!"

"Here, here," boomed a loud, deep voice, "who's giving away my secrets?"

A heavy hand fell on Tycho's shoulder and spun him around. Tycho stared up into the face of another Shou easily as tall as Li, but plump where Li was lean and smiling where Li was dour. It was the big man who had greeted the arriving caravan—and almost certainly the tavernkeeper. Tycho bent low.

"Honored master Ong," he said in Shou, "my humblest apologies—"

Ong waved him to silence.

"My beer is terrible," he replied cheerfully. He held up a pitcher. "Would you like some more?"

Tycho blinked, then laughed and held out his mug.

"Bad beer gets better the more it's drunk!" he said and toasted Ong when his mug had been refilled.

The tavernkeeper turned to Li.

"Countryman?" he asked, lifting the pitcher.

Li shook his head and replied, "I learned my lesson last time."

Ong's smile, almost impossibly, grew even wider. "A return guest," he said. "I thought I recognized

you. Let me see..." he closed his eyes in concentration. "A warrior and a servant of the imperial bureaucracy unless I misjudge your stance. Your voice has the sound of Keelung in Hai Yuan province—one of the silk families of Keelung, I think." Ong opened his eyes. "Kuang LiChien."

Li's eyebrows rose.

"Your memory is impressive."

Ong shrugged.

"A tavernkeeper's trick." Ong glanced back to Tycho and said, "Now you speak Shou with the accent of Ch'ing Tung province, hut if you come from Shou Lung, I'll drink my own beer. You have the look of someone from Faerun's near west, but your accent eludes me. Your voice is excellent, however, and I'd wager that you can sing more than a little."

"Tycho Arisaenn of Spandeliyon in Altumbel," said Tycho with a grin. "If you'd like a song, I'd be happy to oblige." He

slid the chunky wooden body of a strilling around on the strap that held it slung across his back and plucked one of the instrument's strings with his thumb. "Though," he added casually, "it's the custom in Altumbel that a bard drinks for free as long as he plays."

"Ancestors bless Altumbel!" roared Ong. "I've often said it's the most civilized nation of Faerun! Come in, come in!" Wrapping thick arms around both men, he drew them farther into the crowd. "My usual singer is away at present—gone raiding with the other men of the oasis, the ungrateful dog!"

"We'd noticed the scarcity of men around the oasis," Li said. "Aren't they afraid to leave their wives and children unprotected?"

"The men of this oasis have a fierce reputation," Ong explained as they squeezed past a lounging cluster of merchants from the caravan. Ong freed Tycho from his embrace long enough to slosh beer into their mugs. The merchants cheered. Ong raised his pitcher in acknowledgment, then swept Li and Tycho along. "No other ordu or bandit gang would dare raid this oasis for fear of reprisals—though if you were to suggest that to one of them they'd run you through."

"They don't like to admit they're afraid?" asked Tycho.

"They don't like to admit they're afraid of men of flesh and blood," Ong replied, nodding back toward the door flap.

"Local tales say that a powerful spirit dwells in the water here and the Tuigan will do almost anything to avoid offending it. It means they have some strange taboos but it also means—" He spread his arms wide and proclaimed loudly—"that there isn't a safer oasis in all the Endless Wastes!"

A mixture of travelers and local women shouted their agreement. Tycho looked toward the door flap.

"Is there really a spirit in the water?" he asked.

Li groaned and said, "No."

"But what if-?"

"No. No investigating, no exploring," Li said, shaking his head as Ong raised one eyebrow in an unspoken question. "Tycho has an unerring ability to find trouble."

Tycho glared at his friend.

"And Li," he said to Ong, "has an uncanny ability to ignore anything at all interesting!"

Ong slapped his arms around both of them once more, drawing them close.

"Curious or dull," he murmured, "don't question the Tuigans' beliefs. They take them very seriously."

Tycho gave him a disappointed look and asked, "Have you ever seen this spirit?"

"So long as I am among the Tuigan," said Ong, "I have no doubt that it exists. And if you have any sense beneath your curly hair, neither will you." He clapped them on the shoulders and stood back. "Now I believe there was talk of a song?" He reached to refill Tycho's mug again, but his pitcher was finally empty. "No matter," he said and called out, "Ibakha!"

A young Tuigan woman with a full pitcher of beer in her hand—the flirtatious young woman Tycho had seen as the caravan rode into the oasis—came pushing through the crowd. His disappointment vanished as she stopped at the sight of him. Maybe things wouldn't be so dull after all. He gave Ibakha a wink and another smile.

An older woman caught the gesture. In an instant, she was at Ibakha's side, snatching away the pitcher and delivering a few sharp words that made Ibakha flush as red as a bad sunburn. The young woman vanished into the crowd, while the older stalked up to Tycho, Li, and Ong. The pitcher she shoved at Ong, but her anger she unleashed at Tycho in a rush of Tuigan-accented Shou.

"You stay away from Ibakha, Faroon. She is betrothed." She slapped Tycho in the center of his chest and repeated, "Stay away from her!"

She stomped away. Tycho stared after her. After a moment of

stunned silence, Ong cleared his throat.

"I apologize for Chotan. Did I mention that the most significant reason no one would raid this oasis is that everyone is afraid of the women?"

"Really?" Tycho rubbed his chest and winced. "Have you wondered if maybe the men go out raiding to get away from them?"

Ong howled with laughter and poured him fresh beer from the pitcher.

"Play, master bard, and if there's anything you need, just ask any of my women." He grinned and added, "Except perhaps Chotan."

He rolled away into the crowd, greeting each of his customers in turn. Li stared after him.

"There's something I don't like about our host," he said.

"He's friendly, Li," said Tycho with a grin. "You should try it sometime."

He set his mug on a nearby table and settled the butt of his strilling against his shoulder, then undipped the bow from the strap and drew it across the instrument's strings.

"Olare!" he called as faces turned at the sound. "Who wants a song?"

"—but hearts or gold," sang Tycho, "my swag must be sold, because I am—

He lifted his bow and swept it through the air.

"—the king of piiiirrates!" roared the crowd. Tycho ended the song with a flourish and leaped down from the tabletop to applause and ringing cheers. He grinned at Li as he wiped sweat from his face.

"You know," he said, "I think even the Tuigan women enjoyed that."

"And they probably don't have any idea what a pirate is," commented Li. "The pond outside is likely the largest body of water most of them have ever seen."

He sipped cautiously at his millet beer. Tycho laughed, then clipped his bow to the strap of his strilling and slid the

instrument around against his back. He reached for his mug. It was empty.

"When did I finish this?"

"Sometime between The Thayan Pox and A Dwarf Went Delving" said Li.

Tycho looked around. With the music finished, many of the caravan travelers were leaving to stagger back to their bedrolls, though the fearsome women of the oasis were still drinking and playing their game of knives. Pretty young Ibakha was nowhere to be seen, probably sent home for her own protection. There were other serving women almost as pretty, though. Tycho caught the eye of one and gestured with his mug. She boldly sauntered over.

"More beer, FaroonV She didn't wait for a reply before filling his mug. "I am Chaka."

"I'm Tycho," he said. "Faroon—what does that mean, Chaka?" She grinned and replied, "It's the land where you come from, isn't it?"

"Faroon... Faerun." Behind him, Tycho could hear Li snorting derisively at his flirtations. He ignored Li and said, "Your Shou is very good. Do you all speak it?"

"Ong insists on it. He teaches us. He thinks it's a more proper language than Tuigan." Chaka bent close. "You sing very well, Tycho. Maybe tonight I could teach you to sing a Tuigan song."

Her breath smelled of sweet spices. Tycho smiled

"Maybe I could sing a little song just for you, Chaka"

He cupped his hands over hers and sang a ripple of music. As he sang, he reached into himself, focusing his will through the music. Between his fingers and Chaka's, a fragile form took shape. He lifted his hands away to reveal a pale, delicate flower. Chaka stared at it.

"Magic," she breathed.

"A little," Tycho said modestly. "A beautiful flower for a beau —"

"Magic!" squeaked Chaka. She dropped the flower as if it

was spider and jumped away from him. "There is no magic in the oasis! You'll offend—"

She clamped her mouth shut, but her eyes darted toward the tavern's door flap and the water beyond.

"The spirit?" Tycho asked in disbelief. "Magic offends the water spirit?"

Chaka gave a little nod. Tycho cursed the Tuigans' taboos silently and stood up, reaching for her.

"Chaka, I didn't know! It was nothing, just a little trick."

"No!" she yelped and started backing away.

Other people—other Tuigan women—were starting to look toward them. Surly Chotan was already heading in their direction, a storm of a scowl brewing on her face. Tycho took another step toward Chaka.

She turned around and darted through the crowd, vanishing through another flap in the fabric walls and deeper into the pavilion.

"Faroon!" yelled Chotan. "What did you do to her?"

Tycho cursed out loud. Li sighed and stood up.

"How do you manage this, Tycho?" he asked.

"I don't know," he said as he patted Li's chest. "You hold off Chotan. I'll go find Chaka before she gets everyone upset."

He dashed after the frightened woman before Li could do more than sputter and Chotan squawk in outrage.

Beyond the flap, the back rooms of Ong's pavilion were much like the back rooms of any tavern Tycho had ever crept through: small, jammed with stored goods, and dark. Very dark. Tycho cracked his shin against something low and hard, and swallowed an exclamation of pain. Unlike other back rooms, the walls that separated him from the rest of the tavern were literally no thicker than a good carpet. He could hear Chotan berating Li, and closer to hand the suddenly ominous rhythm of falling knives in the women's game.

"Hoi!" shouted the women.

Their cry covered a muffled yelp as Tycho tripped again. Should he risk more magic and Chaka's fear or maim

himself in the darkness?

"Damn water spirit," he muttered, and fished in a belt pouch for a coin.

Clenching it in his fist, he sang a spell. Light leaked out between his fingers—not much, but enough to keep him from stumbling. Playing the faint illumination across the floor, he edged forward.

"Chaka?" he called softly. "Chaka, come out. It's all right."

There was no movement. He crept on. The back room was larger than he expected, and divided up by thin hangings. Chaka could have ducked through or under any of them. Tycho stuck to what seemed to be the largest of the back chambers, stepping quietly around an assortment of boxes, barrels, and sacks. The sounds of the tavern, muffled by the fabric walls, faded to a background murmur. Tycho cursed silently. There was no sign of Chaka. Maybe she had slipped into one of the side chambers after all. Maybe she knew of another door flap he had missed and was no longer even in the pavilion. He clenched his jaw.

Don't worry about it, he told himself, you've talked yourself out of much tighter situations than this!

He started to turn back to the main chamber of the tavern.

"Ah, my beauty! You grow more lovely with each passing day."

Ong's voice. Tycho froze, wrapping his fist tight around the glowing coin and choking off its faint light entirely. In the darkness, he could see an even fainter glow that leaked from a side chamber where the fabric of the hanging wall was rumpled by a box pushed against it. There was no passage to the chamber here—the entrance must have been from one of the other side chambers.

A woman's voice answered Ong in Tuigan and Tycho heard the tavernkeeper click his tongue in gentle reprimand.

"Speak Shou to me, my lovely."

The woman giggled.

"As you command, tremendous one!" she said saucily.

Tycho didn't recognize the woman's voice, but it was soft and musical, like the little bronze bells that the Tuigan women wore on their jacket cuffs. He grinned to himself. What woman of the oasis had Ong charmed into his arms? More importantly, what woman was worth tempting the wrath of a husband or father for a dalliance? He stretched out on the ground and wiggled forward to peer under the hanging.

His eyes went wide.

On the other side of the hanging, carpets and furs and rich eastern silks had been piled up into a kind of bed. Ong sprawled on the pile, his shirt open and his broad belly hanging out. Lounging beside him and rubbing his belly, her beautiful face illuminated by the soft, clearly magical glow of green glass globes, was Ibakha! Ong kissed a finger, then pressed it to Ibakha's lips.

"Are you teasing me?" he asked. Ibakha shook her head and replied, "You, O protector? Never!"

Her fingers paused and Ong gasped as she tweaked a hair.

"Perfidious wench!" the Shou growled. "Do you think that familiarity will protect you from a dragon's wrath?" He forced his voice deep so that it rolled in his chest. "My rage has wiped villages from the face of the world and carved canyons through mountains. I have become a man for you, and your beauty is all that stands between your people and my anger! Do you dare to displease me?"

"Never, great guardian of the oasis, never!" gasped Ibakha in mock fear, then lunged into Ong's arms with such force that they both rolled off of the heaped carpets.

Tycho stifled his laughter as he wriggled back away from the peep hole and stood.

"Ong has what?" exclaimed Li in disbelief. "He's seduced Ibakha."

Tycho leaned back. The main chamber of the tavern was growing empty. They were the last of the caravan travelers in the tent and only a few of the oasis's women, playing one

last round of the knife game, were left. A pitcher of millet beer had been abandoned on the table—Tycho drank straight from it. '

"He's told her that he's the water spirit of the oasis incarnate," Tycho added, "the sly dog!"

Li scowled and said, "I knew there was something I didn't like about him! When he said the Tuigan would do anything to avoid offending their spirit..."

"I don't know if Ibakha really believes her people will be punished if she doesn't keep Ong happy," Tycho said, "but she does believe that the guardian of the oasis has fallen in love with her. I could see it in her eyes." He tapped one finger under his own eye. "Believe me, I've told enough stories to women myself to know the look."

"It's still wrong."

"Ha!" Tycho took another drink from the pitcher. "Where's Chotan? I'd like to know what she'd say about this!"

"Gone," said Li. He nodded toward the door flap. "Possibly to organize the women into a mob to hunt you down. She found the flower you made for Chaka and it vanished while she was holding it. She knows you worked magic in the oasis."

"Ong should hope-she never finds out about the magic lights he has back in his love nest then. He's probably breaking Tuigan taboos with every step." Tycho chuckled. "But I guess he doesn't need to worry. After all, if he's the water spirit, he's the source of them!"

"Hoi! Hoi! Hoi!"

The last women finished their game with a rousing cheer and a final swallow of beer, then rose and swaggered out of the tavern. Li's eyes followed them.

"I think," he said grimly, "that Ong should be careful. I wouldn't want those knives turned away from the gaming table."

"Shhh!" Tycho hissed, kicking him under the table.

Li winced but Tycho flicked his eyes toward the back of the

chamber. Ibakha was stepping out from the flap | that led to the back rooms. She saw them and blushed a deep red. Her eyes darted to the floor and stayed there as she rushed out of the tavern. A few moments later, Ong emerged from the back rooms as well. If he was startled or if he saw Li's glower, he hid it well.

"Still here, my friends?" Ong called. He came over and joined them at the table, producing a mug and holding it out for Tycho to fill. "You'll have a hard ride tomorrow if you linger too long, I can guarantee that."

"I've traveled under worse conditions," Tycho said. He tapped the pitcher against Ong's mug in a toast. "To good health and bad beer. Tell me, Ong, how does a Shou come to run a tavern at an oasis haunted by a Tuigan water spirit?"

Ong drank a mouthful of beer, wincing as he swallowed, and explained, "Through a tragic disagreement. Offend the wrong powers in Shou Lung, Tycho, and you can find yourself exiled to—well, to such a place as this." He waved a hand around them. "Still, it's possible to make the best of a bad situation. This is a good oasis. It's safe, the water is good, caravans stop here fairly frequently —"

. "The men leave their women in the care of the oasis spirit when they go raiding," said Tycho, fighting to hold back a grin.

Li just grunted in distaste. Ong's cup hesitated briefly in its journey back to the tabletop. He glanced at each of them.

"The women can take care of themselves," he said, cautious.

"No doubt they can," Tycho replied, "so long as they don't displease the—"

It was too much. He tried to give Ong a knowing smile, but as soon as his lips even twitched, the grin he had been fighting broke out across his face like a riot. He clapped a hand over his mouth, trying to keep his laughter from bubbling out as well. Beer slopped out of the pitcher as he rocked back and forth. Ong's eyes were narrow. Tycho shook

his head and lifted his hand away from his mouth.

"I'm sorry, Ong," he gasped. "I was in the back looking for Chaka and I saw you and Ibakha. It's just..." He choked off another chuckle. "Well, you saw how Chotan reacted to my just smiling at her!"

He reached across the table to pour Ong more beer.

The Shou put his hand over his mug.

"No," he said.

Tycho shook his head.

"Don't worry! It's your business, not mine!" He raised the pitcher to Ong and added, "But you're a clever one, taking advantage of the Tuigans' own superstitions!"

"The Tuigan are no more superstitious than they should be," said Ong. He reached out and pulled the pitcher from Tycho's hand. "You should go now."

Tycho stared at his empty fingers then at Ong. The tavernkeeper looked back with a flat expression. "Ong..." he began. "Get out."

Tycho could feel blood rush to his face, but Li was the first to move. The Shou pushed his chair away from the table sharply and stood up, leaning forward with his fists on the tabletop.

"Your tavern reflects your soul," he said in distaste, "and both offend me. I don't find this so amusing as Tycho does. I'll leave with pleasure. Perhaps I understand now why you were exiled from the Great Empire."

Ong scowled and said, "Or perhaps you do not. Are all the sons of Kuang so rude?"

Li's breath hissed between his teeth and his hand reached for the sword he hadn't worn. Tycho jumped up.

"Whoa! Easy!" he said, hands held between the two Shou. "Easy, both of you. This is-"

"Oh, be quiet!" Ong snapped. He jerked his head toward the door. "That is the way out. Go, take this ill-bred dog with you, and never foul my presence with your flatulent singing again!"

Tycho stopped and turned slowly to glare at Ong, meeting him harsh gaze for harsh gaze.

"If my singing is flatulent, then I guess no one will listen when I break wind with a new song." He gave Ong a thin smile. "What do you think, Li?" he asked over his shoulder. "The Water Spirit's Lie?"

"For a song," said Li, "it smells very good."

For a moment, Ong regarded them with narrow eyes, then rose slowly from his seat. His massive chest rose and fell with deep, slow breaths.

"If you will not leave on your own," he growled, "maybe you will leave if I take you outside myself!"

"Outside?" Tycho spread his arms. "If you want to try something, O great guardian of the oasis, try it right here."

"It's bad enough when customers break up my tavern," Ong grumbled as he stepped around the table and walked to the door flap, holding it aside for them. "I don't want to do it myself."

Li passed though stiffly, as if the tavernkeeper were invisible, but Tycho spat at Ong's feet as he passed. Outside, the night air of the steppe was cool and still. On the other side of the oasis, the caravan lay silent, the shapes of carts, beasts, and sleeping men indistinct in the moonlight. Nearer to hand the yurts of the Tuigan settled into similar silence as the women of the oasis finally took to their beds. A few paces from the pavilion, Li turned and dropped into a disciplined fighting stance, his hands up and open. Tycho, however, stripped off his strilling and loosened the sleeves of his shirt, stalking back and forth and swearing angrily under his breath.

"Are you sure you're ready for this, you lying barrel of lard?" he called.

Ong let the door flap fall closed behind him and turned around.

"Why," he asked, "would you assume I was lying?"

He took a step forward. The foot that left the ground was

human. The foot that came down was not.

"Blessed Lliira," gasped Tycho.

"Mother of dogs!" cursed Li.

Toes twice as long as Tycho's fingers, each with a membrane of webbing stretched between them and tipped with a thick claw, dug into the hard ground. The creature's hind and forelegs were short, like a crocodile's, but its body was long and sinuous. It reared back on a whiplike tail, and a neck almost as long and thin arched against the night. Scales glittered blue-green

on the creature's back, glossy yellow on its belly—a belly as unmistakably fat as Ong's.

Do you think that familiarity, Ong had asked Ibakha, will protect you from a dragon's wrath?

In a streamlined, wedge-shaped head that carried pearl-white horns and thick whiskers of red and gold, Ong's angry eyes stared down at them.

"Perhaps," he said in a deep, rolling voice, "you don't understand as much as you think you do."

His fat chest swelled with breath.

The rushing sound of air struck terror through Tycho like a cold sword. With a yelp of fear, he hurled himself to the side—and straight into Li. They slammed into the ground together. Tycho managed to twist around just in time to see massive jaws gape wide. Fire? Ice? Poison? He squeezed his eyes shut, waiting for the agony of the dragon's breath.

Except that instead of agony, the dragon's breath enveloped him in gentle coolness. He opened his eyes to thick mist and heavy drops of water falling on him. He touched his cheek.

"Rain?" he breathed.

Li's hand clapped over his mouth. Tycho could just make out his friend's face as he scanned the gray darkness overhead. Somewhere above, something moved. Tycho caught a brief glimpse of a long body writhing through the air—Ong had no wings, but he flew like a snake crawling along the ground—then it was gone, vanished in the mist.

"Honored ancestors watch over us," groaned Li, releasing Tycho.

Tycho wiped water from his eyes. The rain was beginning to come down harder.

"He flies without wings, he breathes rain clouds," the bard choked. "What kind of dragon does that?"

"A chiang lung a dragon of the east, guardian of rivers," said Li. He kept his gaze on the darkness overhead, one hand raised to shield his eyes from the rain. "Ong really is a water spirit, Tycho!"

"He didn't look very spiritlike to me!"

"Lung dragons aren't like the dragons of Faerun. They're mandarins of the Celestial Bureaucracy. They hold posts assigned by the lords of the spirit world."

"He's a bureaucrat?" Tycho hissed

"An angry bureaucrat who could kill us with a swipe!" Li snapped. He scanned this mist. "Where is he? What's he doing?"

From somewhere across the oasis, muffled shouts penetrated the mist—the travelers from the caravan, though it sounded like they were shouting more in wonder at the rain than in fear at a dragon soaring through the night. Ong was hiding in his own rain clouds, Tycho realized. The caravan couldn't see him. He and Li were the only ones who knew what danger they were in.

"He's toying with us!" Tycho cursed. "Li, we have to get to the caravan! There's enough of us together to make a stand!"

He whirled around, groping along the muddy ground for his abandoned strilling.

His fingers closed on wet wood just as Li shouted, "Down!"

From the corner of his eye, Tycho saw mist billow as a long shape came rushing down from the sky. He didn't wait to see more, but just threw himself flat in the mud. The wind of Ong's passage howled cold along his back and the lash of the dragon's tale caught him, sending him tumbling across

the crowd like a toy. He ended up on his back, gasping for air.

Ong was climbing again, gaining height before making another pass. Rage and terror lurched in his belly but Tycho sang out desperately, hurling a discordant note after the vanishing dragon. Magical sound, strong enough to knock a man off his feet, blasted through the clouds and rain. Ong just laughed, a deep chuckle of grim amusement. The clouds opened and rain poured down in heavy curtains. Tycho's guts churned. His magic wasn't enough even to shake the dragon!

The noise of the spell had, however, brought cries of alarm from the unseen caravan. At least they knew something was wrong. Tycho half-staggered, half-slid along the wet ground to Li. The Shou was as muddy as he was.

"The caravan!" Tycho shouted at him over the sound of the rain. "Which way?"

"Here!" Tycho called as he swung around. Human shapes loomed in the darkness. He bit back a yelp of surprise.

"What have you done, Faroon?" snarled Chotaris voice.

A hooded lantern slid open. Its light turned the shadowy clouds to glowing mist, but Tycho could see Chaka, Ibakha, and all the other Tuigan women as well. Many of them were clutching knives.

"Close the lantern before he sees the light!" he urged frantically. "It's Ong—he's a dragon!"

"Of course he is!" spat Ibakha.

"Hold your tongue!" Chotan screeched. Tycho blinked and Li stared, but Ibakha stood tall and proud. Beside her, a wrinkled old woman rolled her eyes. Chotan glared at the old woman. "Khui!"

Khui gave her a suffering look.

"Enough jealousy, Chotan!" she said as calmly as if they were standing around a campfire. "We all have to move aside eventually."

The old woman's Shou was flawless, better than Chotan's or

Chaka's. Tycho's mouth fell open.

"Y-you..." he sputtered. The women of the oasis turned to stare at him. "But..."

"You truly understand nothing, Tycho Arisaenn."

The night air stirred and a wind blew down from above. It pushed aside the rain clouds, clearing an eye of calm before the pavilion though mist still cloaked the rest of the oasis. Tycho and Li stared up as Ong eased his bulk down to float protectively over the women, moonlight and lanternlight combining to flash over his scaly hide.

"You stand on the threshold of the east but still think that you are in the west," Ong continued. "This is no longer Faerun!"

Li made a strangled noise in his throat. Ong's head dipped down until it swayed level with the Shou's.

"And you, son of Kuang. You presume to judge me?" he snarled. His head thrust forward. Tycho could smell his breath—it carried the wet scent of mud, mist, and green leaves. "I have spoken no lies tonight! I am an exile, three hundred years condemned to the westernmost post of the Celestial Bureaucracy by powers greater than you can imagine. Once I was the spirit of a mighty river. Now I am guardian of a sluggish pond, my reach bound by an oasis!"

Tycho swallowed.

"Well," he said weakly, struggling to force back his terror, "I guess that would explain why you've gotten as fat as a lord."

Ong reared back and roared at the sky, the sound of his voice like thunder rolling across the oasis. Out of the silence that followed, new sounds rose: terrified bleats and bellows of frightened animals, shouts of fear and panic from the caravan.

"Ong!" warned Khui. "They'll know you're here!"

Ibakha gasped. Even Chotan looked worried.

The dragon's jaws ground together.

"Three hundred years," he snarled at Tycho and Li through

clenched teeth. "Three hundred years of hiding like a beast, unable to reveal myself. The love of my Tuigan beauties sustains me. The tavern that you so despise, Kuang Li Chien, is my connection to the world. To lose either would be true condemnation. In jest or in truth, I will not let you take them from me!"

Three hundred years of hiding, unable to reveal , myself.

Ong's words fluttered like butterflies against Tycho's fear. That the dragon might be discovered had frightened the fearsome Tuigan women. Even at the height of his rage, Ong had hidden himself in clouds before turning against the men who had angered him.

Tycho's eyes went wide even as Li spread his hands and said desperately, "Great one, neither of us will ever speak of this. By the honor of my ancestors, I swear it!"

"My apologies to your ancestors," Ong growled back, "but I cannot take that chance."

His jaws parted and he lunged forward.

Tycho grabbed Li's shirt and jerked him back and through the door flap of the tavern as Ong's teeth snapped together like a hundred knives only a hand-span in front of them. They stumbled to the soiled carpets of the tavern floor, the door flap falling closed behind them. The fabric shook with Ong's anger. Li stared at it, his face pale. Tycho dragged him to his feet.

"Li, he can't leave the oasis!"

Li's eyes blinked, then focused on Tycho.

"Whatever powers forced Ong into exile here won't let him leave the oasis," Tycho explained urgently. "That's why he's afraid of being discovered—caravans

would avoid the oasis if they knew a dragon occupied it, and warriors would just keep coming after him until he was dead. I bet that's why the Tuigan have a taboo against magic in the oasis. Magic could ferret out Ong!"

. Li flung up his arm and cried, "Tycho, we're still stuck in a tent! A tent won't keep out a dragon!" "But it will keep him

busy!"

Outside, Ong was shouting, his voice changing as he spoke, dwindling from the roar of a dragon to the bellow of a man. The Tuigan women were shouting too. Tycho forced the thought of their flashing knives from his mind. He pulled a dagger from his belt and shoved it into Li's hands.

"Get to the back of the tent and be ready to cut us a new door!"

Li swallowed and ran for the back of the pavilion. Tycho muttered a desperate prayer to whatever deities might be watching and grabbed at the iron leg of a brazier. The hot metal seared his palm, but he choked back the pain and dumped the coals out onto the nearest pile of cushions. He didn't wait to watch the smoldering embers take hold of the fresh tinder, but just ran after Li toward the back of the tent, knocking over every brazier he could.

"Tycho!" shouted Ong.

Tycho whirled around. The fat dragon, wearing his human shape once more, stood in the door of the tavern, flap clutched in his hand, and women crowded behind him.

All of them were momentarily frozen by the sight of the flames rising in the tent.

To lose either women or tavern, Ong had said, would be condemnation. Tycho's music might not have been strong enough to harm the dragon directly, but that didn't mean it couldn't affect him in other ways.

"How about one last song, Ong?" Tycho yelled. He reached inside himself and sang, light ripples of music that hissed and crackled on the air. He sang to the fire.

From within the flames, something answered. Glowing embers rose and shifted like eyes, staring first at Tycho then shifting to Ong. Flames gathered together into a form the size of a child and tendrils of fire reached out. Ong's eyes flashed with anger.

"A fire elemental? You attack a lord of water with a puppet of fire?"

The elemental's tendrils brushed the walls of the tent, which burst into flame. It moved across the carpets and they too burned.

"Who said I was attacking you?" called Tycho. He spun around and plunged through the flap into the back of the tavern. "Now, Li!" he screamed.

Over the crackle of flames and the howls of the dragon, Tycho heard cloth tear as Li opened a rip in the wall of the tent. The fire gave him just enough light to see. He dived through the tavern's new door hard on Li's heels, and kept running-

"Are you sure that will get us enough time?" Li gasped as they raced through the rain.

"Ask me again after we've made it out!"

Behind them, women were shouting and Ong was roaring. A strange liquid rush rumbled through the night, followed by the long hiss of an extinguished flame. Tycho bent his head and ran harder.

The caravan that came straggling along the Golden Way in the morning light was a good deal more subdued than the one that had entered the oasis the night before. All eyes turned—some with wary suspicion, some with outright fear—to the two figures that waited in the meager shadow of the marker stone. Li nudged Tycho as the caravan approached.

"Mother of dogs!" he breathed.

Tycho looked where the Shou pointed.

Chotan and Ibakha rode alongside the caravan—on Li's and Tycho's horses. As they drew close to the marker, they jumped down, letting the horses walk on their own. Both women glared at the men.

"We have a message for you," growled Ibakha. She flung a Tuigan knife into the ground at Tycho's feet. "Ride the Wastes with care."

Tycho swallowed and said, "Is that a message from Ong?"

"No," said Chotan. "It's a warning from the Tuigan." "And

Ong?" asked Li.

"He sends his respect for your fast thinking—and reminds you that even exiles have friends." The grin she gave them was vicious and eager. "Enjoy Shou Lung, Faroon. You ride with a dragon's attention now."

They turned and walked back down the trail toward the oasis. Li and Tycho stared after them.

THE PRISONER OF HULBURG

Richard Lee Byers

1 & 2 Mirtul, the Year of Rogue Dragons

His leather cloak rattling in the cold night wind, Pavel Shemov hurled his god-granted power against the pale, twisted things hovering around the sailboat. First, assuming them to be a product of sorcery, the priest tried to wipe the gaunt, translucent figures from the air with a counterspell. Next, suspecting them to be spirits of the dead, he tried to burn them away with a blaze of conjured sunlight.

Nothing worked. Every second, more phantoms oozed into view, whispering obscenities, pawing at their prey. At first, Pavel had been unable to feel their touch. Then it had become a slimy brushing. Soon, he reckoned, the specters would be substantial enough to hurt a person.

The three-man crew realized the same thing, and panic-stricken, yammered and flailed ineffectually at the phantoms.

A child-sized figure among the humans, Will Turnstone shouted, "Ignore them! Put in to shore!"

The halfling might as well have been a mute for all the good his exhortations did. An apparition raked at Pavel's forehead. The attack stung, and blood dripped down into his left eye. Across the deck, specters ripped the flesh of sailors, or assailed the boat itself, clawing at the timbers.

"Dive overboard!" Pavel shouted.

It was their only chance. He cast about for Will.

Swinging his curved, broad-bladed sword, the half-ling slashed one glimmering assailant to fraying ecto-plasmic

tatters and sidestepped the talons of another. He was holding his own, but it couldn't last. There were just too many phantoms.

Pavel dashed forward, snatched up his friend, and leaped over the side. As he splashed down in the frigid waters of the Moonsea, he invoked the magic of his enchanted cloak.

The folds of the leather mantle expanded into rippling, pulsing wings to propel him through the depths like a manta ray. He could breathe like a fish as well. The water was cool in his lungs.

Will squirmed in his grip, pointed upward, and he realized that though he could breathe, his comrade couldn't. He surfaced warily, but found he'd swum far enough to evade the apparitions. They remained intent on the sailboat and its immediate vicinity.

Pavel carried Will on to shore, then swam back to look for the sailors. By then, the wraiths had disappeared, and unfortunately, the mariners and boat had, too. Nothing remained but drifting planks and other flotsam.

Will crouched and hid in the shadow of a stand of brush, then waited, shivering, his heart still pounding, for Pavel to return. At last the lanky, handsome cleric reared up from the shallows and waded onto the pebbly strand.

Will was relieved to see his friend, but it wouldn't do to show it. It would violate the spirit of their perpetual mock feud.

The half ling straightened up and sneered, "Nice job out there on the boat. It's good to see your magic is as useful as ever."

Though plainly upset at the slaughter of the crew, Pavel made the effort to answer in kind: "At least I had sense enough to flee when the situation became hopeless. What were you trying to accomplish by standing and fighting? That was idiotic even by your standards."

"The spooks piled on me—obviously, they knew which of us posed a threat to them—and I had to cut my way clear. You might want to fix that scratch on your brow before what

passes for your brains leaks out."

"Right. I forgot all about it."

Pavel recited a prayer to his patron deity, Lathander, lord of the dawn, sketched a sacred symbol on the air, and his hand glowed with a red-gold light. He touched it to the cut, and the wound closed.

Will ripped up some grass and wiped his exquisitely balanced hornblade, as such oversized halfling swords were called, and asked, "So what happened out there?"

"I don't know," Pavel admitted. "Obviously, something uncanny attacked us, but it didn't feel like conventional magic, or spirits, either."

"Which leaves...?"

The human shook his head and answered, "At this point, all I know is, we've seen how the Zhentarim are destroying 'unlicensed' ships and caravans."

"But we were sailing a stolen Zhentish patrol boat," said Will.

"We were supposed to be safe."

"Apparently that trick has stopped working."

"No, really? You think?" The half ling sighed. "What do we do now?"

"Well, at least we made it almost to Hulburg before the Zhents spotted us." Pavel pointed to the ruined city farther up the shore, a vague mass just visible in the dark. "Let's find a safe place to rest, then start our explorations in the morning. We can worry about how to get back to Thentia when the time comes."

For centuries, war had plagued the Moonsea, laying waste to town after town. Hulburg was one such casualty. Twenty-five years past, the Zhentarim sacked the port. The wilderness was well on its way to reclaiming it. Animals laired amid the rubble of crumbling houses, while grass, brush, and small trees choked the streets. At least, Pavel thought, it meant a fellow didn't have to look too hard to find breakfast. He picked berries, taking care to avoid the long thorns protecting them, and handed half to Will. His curly black

lovelocks bedraggled from the dunking they'd received, Will eyed the fruit askance.

"What's this, a prank to give me the runs? They're green."

"It's spring, cretin," said Pavel. "Naturally, they're green. They're still edible."

The halfling chewed one up and swallowed it, grimacing the while, and said, "Why did I ever leave Saerloon?"

"Because your thieves' guild, showing excellent judgment, decided to kill you. Look, if you don't want the berries, give —"

"Hush!" Beckoning for Pavel to follow, Will darted into one of the decaying houses. The thatched roof had fallen in, but skilled hunters both, they nevertheless managed to traverse the floor without their steps snapping and crunching. They hunkered down behind a window and peered out.

Pavel understood what was going on. Will had heard someone, or something, coming. It wasn't necessarily a threat. They'd assumed they might find a few people still dwelling among the ruins, inoffensive farmers or fishermen most likely. But it seemed wiser to find out for sure before revealing themselves.

Pavel scowled when four men-at-arms tramped into view, chatting, uncocked crossbows dangling in their hands. Each wore the somber trappings of a Zhentilar soldier, with the Black Network's dragon-and-scepter emblem emblazoned on their tunics.

Once the warriors had drifted on past and out of earshot, Pavel said, "Do the Zhents know we survived? Are they hunting us?"

Will snorted, "Of course not. Those soldiers weren't expecting any trouble. It was a routine patrol."

"If so, it means the Zhents have taken control of Hul-burg. But why allocate troops to occupy a ruin? There's nothing here anymore."

"Could they be looking for the same lost knowledge we are?"

Pavel shook his head and replied, "I don't see how. They

don't have Sammaster's notes. But even so, with Zhents prowling about, it's going to be difficult to explore the ruins unmolested."

"No fooling."

"Curse it, anyway! How many are there, where are they camped, and what are they up to?"

"Seeing as how I'm the scout," Will answered, grinning. "I guess I'd better find out."

A battered castle, its crenellated ramparts stained and jagged as a beggar's teeth, overlooked the harbor. As soon as he caught a glimpse of it, Will surmised the Zhentarim had set up shop there, and when he spotted the black-clad sentries walking the battlements, he knew he was correct. Two vessels, a war galley and a patrol boat, were moored at one of the sagging docks below.

Will turned and skulked on, through streets overgrown with weeds and littered with rubble, slipping from one bit of cover to the next. Until, at the juncture of two lanes, he heard approaching footsteps. He squatted behind a horse trough and peeked around the side.

A freckled, snub-nosed youth, his Zhentish uniform too loose and short on his gangly limbs, slunk by with many a glance back over his shoulder. Will inferred that the lad had slipped away from the castle without permission, to shirk work or scratch a carnal itch in private.

Will pulled the warsling from his belt, glad that oil and enchantment had kept the leather supple despite its immersion the night before. He rose and let fly.

The polished skiprock hit the Zhent in the back of the head. An expert marksman, Will would have been astonished if it hadn't. The only question was whether it had done more harm than intended, some skulls being more brittle than others. As the youth pitched forward, the halfling darted forth to check him.

It was all right. The warrior was still breathing, and any damage short of death, Pavel's prayers could reverse.

Pavel could also do something else that Will couldn't accomplish. He could haul the ungainly bulk of a fellow human away before some other Zhentilar discovered the youth lying unconscious in the street. The halfling ran to fetch his friend.

"We're running a risk," Pavel said. "What if somebody misses him?"

"The longer you dawdle," Will said, "the more likely that is. So get on with it."

Pavel had carried the youth into a shadowy derelict shop and set him on the dusty floor. Will then tied the prisoner's hands and feet with strips of cloth cut from his tunic. The soldier still lay motionless where they'd secured him, the hair on the back of his head matted with blood.

It struck Pavel that the wretch didn't look much like the popular notion of a vicious Zhentilar. Maybe he wasn't. Perhaps he was just a callow lad the Black Network had conscripted into its forces.

But even if he was, Pavel and Will still couldn't afford to be gentle with him. The Zhentarim garrison posed too great a danger, and their mission was too important.

Pavel murmured a prayer. His hand tingled with warmth and radiated a rosy light. He pressed his palm to the wound in the Zhent's scalp, and the gashed skin twitched as it knit itself back together. The captive gasped and jerked away from his touch.

Will pounced on the Zhent and pressed a dagger to his throat.

"Don't call out, and don't struggle!" the halfling snarled. The soldier froze.

"That's good," said Will. "Now, we're going to ask you some questions, and I recommend you answer truthfully. Do you see the sun amulet hanging around my partner's neck? He's a priest of the Morninglord, and he's going to weave a spell that will alert him if you lie to us. If you do, I'll cut you. Understand?"

"Yes," the youth wheezed.

Pavel murmured and swept the talisman through a mystic pass, pretending to weave an enchantment. He couldn't really utilize the magic Will had described, because, unable to anticipate that he and his comrade would soon be interrogating a prisoner, he hadn't requested that particular spell when praying for his daily allotment at dawn. But the Zhent didn't know that, and thus would fear to dissemble.

Pavel gave the youth a cold stare and asked, "Why is the Black Network occupying this empty place?"

"Please," said the youth, "if I betray them, they'll torture me to death."

Will shifted the knife. The Zhent gasped and flinched away as best he could with his limbs bound and the halfling holding onto him. A drop of blood slid down his neck.

"If you don't cooperate," said Will, "I'll do the same right now."

It was another bluff. Will and Pavel weren't torturers. But the Zhent had no way of knowing that, either.

"I swore oaths to Bane," the soldier pleaded. "If I break them, then, after I die, he'll rip my soul forever."

"No," said Pavel, "he won't. Renounce the Black Lord, run away from the Zhentarim, find a decent way of living, and he'll have no power over you. I give you my word as a servant of the Morninglord."

"So," said Will, "you can die today, or have a second chance. What's it going to be? Decide fast, I'm getting bored."

He flicked the knife, making a second superficial cut.

The Zhent cringed and said, "All right! Ask your questions."

"I already asked one," Pavel said. "Why are you here?"

"To protect the dragon."

Pavel and Will exchanged glances.

"What dragon?" the half ling asked.

"He's called Vercevoran," said the Zhent. "Somebody said he's an emerald dragon. He looks like he was carved out of a big, green jewel."

"Oh, blessed powers!" Pavel exclaimed.

"What?" asked Will. "Does that tell you something?"

"The forces that attacked us on the water," said the priest.

"They didn't seem like true magic, or actual unclean spirits, either. But there's another sort of power, exceedingly rare, a pseudo-wizardry of the mind. Gem dragons are among the creatures possessing such abilities, talents well suited to keeping watch over the entire Moonsea and striking at those who journey without the Zhentarim's authorization." He turned back to the soldier. "Am I right?"

The youth goggled in amazement at his perspicacity and said, "Yes."

"I don't understand" said Will. "Why would an emerald dragon help the Zhents? Gem wyrms aren't totally evil, are they? And why aren't his keepers worried about him succumbing to the Rage and running amok?"

"He's a prisoner," said the Zhent, "magically forced to serve. The spellcasters back in the Citadel of the Raven called up something special to control him. I don't know what. It keeps to itself, and walks abroad shrouded in a cloak and hood."

"Then explain this," Will said. He stalked to the doorway to take a wary look at the street outside. "The dragon's important to your masters' plans. So why keep him in Hulburg? Why not in one of your strongholds, the citadel, Zhentil Keep, or Mulmaster?"

"I think I know," said Pavel. "This one creature, mighty as he is, can't perform the task the Zhentarim have set him all by himself. The dastards need a ring of watchers linked mind to mind positioned around the Moonsea. They need a psychic hereabouts to close the circle." He smiled at the youth. "Am I correct?"

"I think so," said the captive. "I mean, common soldiers like me aren't even supposed to know, but you hear things. Vervevoran and the other slaves are all linked in a pattern that makes their minds stronger than normal."

"This is... interesting," said Will.

"And important," said Pavel. "We knew we were in peril every time we traveled. Now we know why."

"And we know how to remove the threat. Break one strand loose and the whole psychic web collapses."

"Exactly."

Will played with his bloody dagger, tossing and catching it as he mulled the prospect over.

"We could try hiking back to Thentia for reinforcements," said the halfling, "but the wyrm would probably sense us making the trip and hammer us again. Whereas you and I have already slipped in close enough to strike."

"Right. I wouldn't like our chances fighting an entire Zhentarim garrison and this shrouded demon, too, but that's not the point. We simply have to creep in and divest them of Vercevoran." "Any thought as to how?"

"I may be able to dispel the enchantments binding him."

Will arched an eyebrow and asked, "May?"

"It could be tricky, time-consuming, or dangerous."

"Then how about this? We kill the wyrm. If the Zhents have taken away his free will, he may not lift a claw to defend himself."

Pavel frowned and said, "That option doesn't sit well with me."

"Me, either, really, but think about it: Jewel drakes aren't utterly wicked by nature, but they're not exactly good, either. I've heard tales of them killing folk and raiding for treasure."

"We don't know that Vercevoran has ever done such things."

"But we do know there's a Rage building. What if the wyrm's already in frenzy, with only his bonds holding him in check? What if he goes berserk as soon as we free him, and tears into us?"

"Look," said Pavel, "let's evaluate the situation when we actually reach the creature, and decide then."

"Fair enough." Will pivoted back toward the captive, who, having overheard their exchange, was gaping at them as if

they were crazy to contemplate such a venture. "We need to know everything about the layout of the castle and the disposition of the guards."

The weathered limestone curtain wall provided plenty of handholds for a burglar of Will's abilities. He just wished Selune would see fit to hide her silvery smile behind a cloud. If, as Pavel claimed, the hunters were doing the work of the deities of light, it seemed the least she could do.

Still, moon or no, people seldom saw Will when he didn't want them to, and he made it onto the battlements without incident. Crouching low, he peered about, making sure none of the sentries was close at hand, then crept down a stairway into the courtyard. The smells of wood smoke, fried sausage, and the Zhents' sanitary arrangements drifted on the chilly night air. Snoring sounded from the outbuildings along the base of the wall.

But a few of the Zhents were awake, and the spearman sitting on a bench behind the sally-port was one of them. Will spun his warsling, bounced a skiprock off the warrior's head, and the human toppled off the seat. Will dragged the bench closer to the secondary egress, climbed atop it, and slid the bar to the side.

As soon as he opened the postern, Pavel, wrapped in the black mantle he'd appropriated from their prisoner, slipped inside. He peered across the bailey at the central keep that, according to the gangly youth, held Vercevoran.

Will gave his comrade an inquiring look. Pavel nodded, and they advanced on the massive slab of a tower. In the dark, wrapped in his black war cloak, the priest hoped to pass for a Zhent if anybody noticed him at all. Will continued to trust in his thief-craft to hide him from hostile eyes.

The keep had two entrances, an imposing set of double doors on one face and a smaller one on the opposite side. The intruders skulked to the humbler entry, and Pavel tried to open it. It wouldn't budge. Will selected a pick from his

pouch of thief's tools and inserted it in the keyhole.

After a moment, he whispered, "It isn't locked."

"You mean, you're too incompetent to defeat the mechanism."

"I mean, it isn't engaged. Now that I think about, where would the Zhents have found a key to this old lock anyway? The door's magically sealed, which means it's your job to open it."

The priest frowned and said, "I only have three dis-pellings prepared. I'd hoped to save them all to attack Vercevoran's bindings."

"Don't be even stupider than usual. We have to reach the wyrm, or we're beaten before we start."

Pavel murmured a rhymed couplet and swirled his hand through a pass. Power whined, and for an instant, the whole door shone with a golden light. Will winced at the commotion, but when he peered about, saw no sign that anyone else had noticed.

Pavel twisted the tarnished brass handle, and the latch clicked open. He cracked the door, and he and Will peeked inside. Will caught his breath.

The keep's entire ground floor was one big, high-ceilinged room. Otherwise, it wouldn't have been large enough to hold its prisoner. Vast and serpentine, batlike wings furled, Vercevoran lay motionless in the middle of the floor, with only the slow expansion and contraction of his chest demonstrating he was still alive. The blank, phosphorescent eyes, a paler green than the scintillant scales, stared at nothing.

Despite the wyrm's immobility, his evident helplessness, he was so imposing that Will needed a moment to take in the other features of the hall. Crystal globes atop wrought iron tripods shed the soft, steady light illuminating the captive. Limned in gold and scarlet pigments, intricate geometric designs entwined with writing radiated out from Vercevoran across the floor. The air smelled of bitter incense and the

drake's own dry, reptilian scent.

"What do you think?" whispered Will.

"I need a minute," Pavel replied.

He prowled the room, examining first the glowing orbs, then stooping to inspect the figures painted on the floor.

"Well?" Will demanded.

"Patience."

"Bugger that. We're in danger, lingering here. Look, it's wizardry holding the drake, and you're no wizard. It's no shame to admit you can't figure out how to free him."

"I do know, in theory. I've studied how arcane magic works, and I understand how to pit my own kind of power against it."

"I don't want to butcher the poor creature, either," said Will, "but if we don't fix it so we can travel freely, we're never going to solve the puzzle of Sammaster's journal in time to do anybody any good. It's thousands of lives against one."

Will drew his hornblade from its scabbard.

"No. The Morninglord teaches—"

Pavel cried out and clutched at his head with both hands.

For an instant, Will didn't understand what was wrong. Then he too staggered as agony burned inside his skull. When the pain finally abated, his upper lip was wet with the blood flowing from his nostrils, and a figure stood on the stairway that ran up the wall to the higher levels of the tower.

Will had never seen anything like the creature, but reckoned it could only be the demon the Zhents had summoned to control Vercevoran. In the keep, the tanar'ri had dispensed with its cowl and mantle to reveal a slimy, burly, ogre-sized frame so hunchbacked it was natural for it to lumber about on all fours. Fanged jaws jutted beneath a protuberant brow, a long, thin tongue flickered beyond its teeth, and a sort of cage of bony extrusions ran all the way along its crooked spine. Within that latticework glistened moist, whorled tissue like a prodigious quantity of exposed brain.

"Splendors of the dawn," breathed Pavel, "it's a cere-brilith."

"I'm guessing that's bad," said Will.

The demon knuckle-walked farther down the steps. "Who are you?" it snarled. "How did you get in here?"

Will's head still throbbed from the cerebrilith's psychic attack. But he knew he and Pavel had to shake off the shock of the unexpected assault and fight. The hal-fling leaped to the side—a sudden maneuver he hoped would startle his foe—readied his warsling, and let fly. The skiprock struck the demon in its round black eye. The cerebrilith recoiled.

"Hit it, you idiot!" Will shouted.

Spurred into motion, Pavel rattled off a prayer. The air grew warmer for an instant, and sparks of red-gold light danced about the cerebrilith's misshapen head. Will couldn't tell exactly what his friend had done to the demon, but the magic must have had some effect, because the tanar'ri let out a screech.

Amazing, Will thought, snatching for another sling stone, we're winning.

Then the cerebrilith roared, "Kill them!" Whereupon Vercevoran surged to his feet and spun around toward the intruders.

Gigantic jaws gaping, sinuous throat swelling, the emerald dragon howled. Knowing the noise could kill anyone caught in front of the wyrm's head, Will and Pavel flung themselves to opposite sides. Still, the cry shook the half ling's bones and spiked pain through his head and torso, even as it vibrated the floor, threatening his balance, and jolted dirt loose from the rafters.

Vercevoran pivoted, chasing Pavel. Reeling, the priest only barely managed to dodge the dragon's raking talons. So long and heavy were the hooked, glittering claws that if only one of them snagged in his flesh, it could easily rip him limb from limb.

And if no one intervened, taking the pressure off Pavel, enabling him to recover his equilibrium and come on guard, Vercevoran certainly was going to rend him. Bellowing, Will

cut at the wyrm's hind leg. The hornblade penetrated the shimmering jade scales to gash the flesh beneath, but not deeply. The wounds wouldn't even slow a dragon down.

They likely stung, though, and the reptile whirled toward him. The time had come to vault or somersault clear, away from its fore claws and jaws. Unfortunately, though, Will had never fought a gem drake before, and some subtlety in the way Vercevoran moved threw off his reckoning. He hesitated, unable to gauge precisely when or in what direction to spring, and in that instant, the chance was lost. The emerald wyrm lunged forward, and he had to scramble backward to avoid being trampled.

It only took a second for Vercevoran to pin him against the wall. The dragon struck at him. He sidestepped, and the enormous fangs clashed together on empty air. He riposted, but the hunting sword failed to penetrate the reptile's natural armor.

Vercevoran lifted a forefoot. Still caught against the wall, Will poised himself to dodge, and a voice whispered in his mind, commanding him to stand still. He froze, and the dragon's claws slashed in a horizontal arc.

Somehow, at the last possible instant, Will broke free of the compulsion and leaped to the side. Vercevoran's attack caught him anyway, flung him through the air, and only a tumbler's trained reflexes enabled him to roll and avert a skin full of shattered bones when he smashed down on the floor. He scrambled up and took

stock of himself. His last-ditch defensive maneuver had thrown off Vercevoran's aim just enough to save him from serious harm. The drake's claws had slashed his leather armor and cut the flesh beneath, but not deeply enough to incapacitate him. Above him on the stairs, the cerebrilith snarled in frustration.

Will didn't think the tanar'ri had any actual reason to be upset. If it could still attack despite the enchantment Pavel had cast to hinder it, then it and Vercevoran were likely to

kill the intruders soon enough. It was obvious the hunters couldn't contend with a demon and a dragon simultaneously in that cramped, enclosed arena.

The only hope, then, was to change the game. Grateful that, when Vercevoran had tagged him, the blow had at least served to fling him to a spot where he didn't have his back against a wall, Will spun his warsling and slammed skiprocks into the reptile's head.

"You want me?" he cried. "Here I am! Come get me!"

He faked a dodge to the right, then sprinted toward the smaller door, which was too low and narrow for a full-grown wyrm to use. Will reached it ahead of his pursuer. He plunged through and spun himself to the side, where Vercevoran couldn't reach him. Behind him, the wyrm's claws clacked on the floor, and his tail swept from right to left. Inferring from those noises that the drake had turned, Will risked a peek back inside. Sure enough, Vercevoran was racing toward the double doors on the far side of the hall. When the dragon hit them, they burst apart as if they were made of paper.

When Vercevoran followed Will out into the night, Pavel understood what his partner had in mind. While the halfling led the dragon on a chase, Pavel

was supposed to slay the cerebrilith, then dissolve the enchantments holding Vercevoran in thrall. All this in the brief time before an old and powerful dragon would otherwise catch and kill a lone halfling.

Even though the cerebrilith was presumably still blind from the spell he'd cast on it, Pavel had no idea if he was up to the challenge, but knew he had no choice but to try. He began a prayer, reciting the words under his breath so his adversary wouldn't hear.

Then the cerebrilith vanished. Perhaps it had become invisible, but Pavel knew there was another possibility: Some demons could translate themselves instantly from one location to the next. He whirled, and standing more or less

erect for the first time, shovel-sized hands poised to rake, jaws gaping, the hulking tanar'ri was right beside him. Though Pavel had blinded it, its clairvoyance enabled it to orient on him.

But maybe the blindness slowed it down. It hesitated before lashing out with its talons, and that gave Pavel time to skip back out of range, still maintaining the precise cadence and enunciation his incantation required.

Red-gold light washed through the room. A luminous mace appeared in the air, then bashed the cerebrilith as if a ghost were swinging it.

Pavel smiled. With luck, the conjured weapon would confuse and hold the demon back while he assailed it with more magic.

But the harassment didn't hinder the cerebrilith as much as he'd hoped. The tanar'ri roared, and a harsh white light blazed from its body. The radiance seared Pavel like a brand, and the agonizing heat didn't end with the flare. The priest looked down. His clothing was on fire.

He dropped and rolled. That extinguished the fire, but by the time he finished, the demon was stooping over him. The hovering mace bashed chips from the bony spikes along its spine, but it ignored the punishment to reach for the human laying supine on the floor.

Pavel swung the enchanted mace of steel and oak he carried in his hand. Sprawled as he was, he had no hope, of striking with much force or accuracy, but somehow managed to knock the cerebrilith's big, gnarled hand away. He scrambled backward, trying to get clear.

He wasn't quick enough. The tanar'ri caught him by the leg and lifted his foot toward its stained, jagged fangs.

"Freeze!" Pavel cried.

That too was a spell, and it snagged the creature's will for a second. He kicked free of the demon's grip.

Not unscathed, however. The creature's talons had pierced his boot and the muscle beneath, and in the course of

flailing loose, he tore and enlarged the wounds. When he floundered to his feet, his leg nearly buckled. It would give way if he didn't favor it.

Indeed, he hurt all over, and reckoned he was hurt pretty badly. Fortunately, he could heal himself, but he couldn't focus on that and fend off a demon at the same time. He had to neutralize the tanar'ri first, and quickly, before shock and blood loss eroded a critical measure of his strength and agility.

Commencing another spell, he backed away from the cerebrilith. The demon turned its head, tracking the movement, then vanished from beneath the pounding, luminous mace. The conjured weapon streaked forward, pursuing its target. The line in which it flew pointed to the spot where the creature had reappeared, otherwise Pavel would never have sensed it on his right flank in time to recoil to the left.

Even so, a swipe of its claws ripped his brigandine and scored the skin beneath. It hurt, but he refused to let pain ruin his spell. He kept the rhythm, and lashed his unarmed hand through the proper figure.

Power burned in his palm, and when the cerebrilith lunged after him, he thrust out his hand and discharged it. A beam of brilliant light leaped forth and caught the demon square in the muzzle, shattering a number of its fangs. The tanar'ri stumbled, and the flying mace smashed through a section of the bony extrusions on its spine and started pulping the whorled tissue beneath. The demon fell to one knee. It lifted an arm, evidently to ward off the glowing weapon, but then the limb flopped back to the floor as if it had run out of strength.

Pavel hobbled forward to strike at the cerebrilith. It roared, startling him. Not so weak after all, it grabbed the wrist of his weapon arm and yanked him close. Its jaws spread wide, and alas, Lathander's light hadn't broken all its teeth—it still had all the dentition required to bite him to pieces.

Will knew it would only take Vercevoran a moment or two to dash around the outside of the keep. He spent a precious instant standing still, listening, until he knew from which direction the dragon was coming. Then he sprinted in the other, keeping ahead of his pursuer.

When he'd circled the tower, he dashed on toward the line of outbuildings at the foot of the curtain wall. Zhents, roused by the commotion, were scurrying from the barracks. Some spotted him, and maneuvered to intercept him. Without breaking stride, he spun his warsling. The skiprock cracked into one soldier's head, then rebounded to strike the comrade next to him. The first human fell, and the second reeled.

Then the remaining Zhents balked and peered upward, eyes wide. Will didn't need to look back to know they'd just caught sight of Vercevoran. The dragon was still on his track, and he was flying.

Something—hunter's instinct, maybe—warned Will the wyrm was about to unleash that devastating roar. He sprang, somersaulted, trying to dodge. It must have worked. The deafening bellow jolted him, but did no crippling harm. Whereas three Zhents flailed and dropped, blood streaming from every opening in their heads.

Vercevoran attacked again just a heartbeat later. Glowing white strands of some unearthly stuff writhed from the empty air around Will's body to snatch for him like tentacles. He dived and flipped to his feet beyond their reach.

Above him, something occluded the light of the moon and stars. He ran on, plunging through a doorway of an outbuilding. Vercevoran, thwarted in his attempt to swoop down on the half ling like an owl catching a mouse in its talons, landed on the ground instead, then lunged, jaws gaping. Will slammed the door. The whole wall banged and shook as the drake rammed into it.

Will cast about. The wall would only keep out a wyrm for a few seconds. His survival depended on finding another way

out of that room.

There! A small, round opening intended for ventilation, high in the right-hand wall, it wouldn't accommodate a human, but a halfling might manage. Will sprang onto the desk, leaped again, and caught hold of the laths crisscrossing the hole. The wood was soft and easy to bash away. He squirmed through an instant before Vercevoran smashed down the wall behind him.

He dashed out of the narrow space between one outbuilding and the next and on through another door.

Vercevoran had caught up with him, so he couldn't run around in the open anymore. His only chance was to take cover in enclosed spaces, slipping from one to the next before the dragon crashed in on him.

Time after time, a collapsing wall or roof nearly battered him and buried him in rubble. Again and again, he only escaped a storeroom, carpenter's workshop, or kitchen in the last second before the drake burst in. Meanwhile, he was grimly aware he was running short of outbuildings.

He scrambled out a window. To his left, Vercevoran roared. The noise had a different timbre than before. Something about it made Will pause in his frantic scuttling and try to determine what was going on.

His head and forelegs inside, wings, hindquarters, and lashing tail outside, Vercevoran had jammed in the doorway of the armory his quarry had vacated mere moments before. In a matter of seconds, the wall surrounding the opening would crumble and liberate the wyrm. But for the moment he was stuck.

Will stared at the creature's flank,-at the vulnerable point so temptingly exposed, the thin spot in the scaly hide with the pulsing heart behind. If he advanced quickly but silently, he had a fair chance of landing a mortal blow.

He glided forward, then, recalling what Pavel had said, he hesitated. The Zhents had enslaved Vercevoran. He wasn't responsible for his actions.

He spat. To the Abyss with Pavel's squeamishness. Will needed to kill the dragon or Vervevoran would kill him, simple as that. He skulked onward.

Too late. The wall shattered, and Vervevoran rounded on him.

Will spun around to flee, but his legs wouldn't run. They tangled, and as he fell, he realized a psychic assault had paralyzed him.

A great weight pressed him down into the mud. Vervevoran had his forefoot on him, and for a moment it seemed the reptile simply intended to crush him. Then, however, the dragon gripped him in his talons and lifted him toward his jaws.

Pavel planted both feet on the cerebrilith's breast, exerting every bit of his dwindling strength, and braced his legs to keep the tanar'ri from dragging him to its fangs.

The cerebrilith raked at his head with its other hand. He jerked up his free arm, and the creature's claws tore it from wrist to elbow. It was better than if they'd ripped his face away.

Still, it was only a matter of time before the demon, its blindness and the trauma of its various wounds notwithstanding, landed a crippling or lethal attack. With his weapon hand locked in his opponent's grasp, Pavel needed another way to strike at it, and the knife in his belt wouldn't serve. Since it bore no enchantments, it wouldn't pierce a tanar'ri's flesh.

He started gasping out an incantation, yanked the sun amulet from around his neck, and swept it through the initial pass. The cerebrilith snatched to stop him. Somehow Pavel managed both to avoid its groping talons and complete the figure properly as well. Golden light pulsed from the pendant.

He had to drop the amulet to receive the second luminous mace materializing inside his bloody fingers. He used it to beat at the demon's head, while the flying weapon he'd

conjured previously continued to hammer its spine. The demon collapsed and sprawled motionless, acrid fluids leaking from its wounds. Pavel didn't know which weapon had struck the, mortal blow, nor did he care. He pried his wrist from the tanar'ri's death grip. The effort made his head swim. He was in danger of passing out. He wheezed a prayer that drew Lathander's warm, healing radiance into his body. He felt steadier, though still weary, weak, and sore. It would have to do, because he lacked the time for anything more. Will needed him. Pavel scrutinized the glyphs on the floor. When he thought he understood them, how they interconnected and how to disassociate them, he croaked out the incantation and lashed his amulet through the proper pass. To no effect. He could feel that nothing changed. Perhaps that was because he didn't fully understand the bindings, but he wasn't going to comprehend them any better, not without hours of study. He simply had to try again with his final counterspell. He drew a deep breath and declaimed the incantation with all the precision and force of will he could muster. A sweet and intricate harmonic, like a note sustained by a choir, sang through the hall. The painted words and symbols burst into flame, and the lights in the orbs atop the tripods guttered out. Vervevoran stumbled. Helpless in the drake's grip, Will certainly hadn't done anything to cause it. Could it be that Pavel had finally set the reptile free? Evidently so. Will had no extraordinary facility for reading what passed for a dragon's facial expressions, but still, as Vervevoran hissed and shook his head, he could see something—intelligence, maybe, or self-awareness—returning. It showed in the set of the wyrm's jaw, the flare of his nostrils, and the narrowing of his lambent eyes. Then those eyes blazed. Vervevoran lashed his wings, a snap

like a thousand whips cracking at once, and gave a prodigious roar.

Wonderful, thought Will, he's got the Rage, and he's still going to eat me. Pavel, you jackass.

But Vercevoran didn't pop him into his mouth. Instead, the dragon wheeled toward the Zhents the halfling hadn't even noticed until just then. The chaos following on Will and Pavel's intrusion had caught them by surprise, but the officers had managed to rally the men-at-arms to sort the situation out. The reavers stood in formation, facing the wyrm, but thus far, not attacking. They were hoping they didn't need to, that Vercevoran was still under the cerebrilith's control.

The dragon dashed that hope by setting Will down, then launching himself at his erstwhile masters. He hadn't fallen into frenzy after all, but that didn't keep him from hating those who'd presumed to bind him.

Will stood back and watched the slaughter. It only took a minute or so. Then the wyrm leaped up and flew away into the night.

--9fJd--

Pavel reckoned he and Will had found the archives Sammaster had visited Hulburg to consult, records not scribed on paper but graven in stone. Dimly lit by the shafts of golden sunlight spilling through the doorway and the cracks in the roof, the cavernous temple of Oghma, god of knowledge, had endless lines of words and pictographs chiseled from floor to lofty ceiling on the white marble walls.

Pavel tried to feel excited, but perhaps because his half-healed wounds still ached, simply couldn't

manage it. It was going to take days, maybe tendays, to decipher all that lore and determine which parts pertained to the frenzy, if, in fact, any of it did. It was time the search could ill afford.

"What's wrong?" asked Will.

Evidently Pavel had let his demoralizing reflections show in

his expression.

"Nothing," said the priest, trying to shake off defeatism.

"Let's each take a wall. You'll find a lot you can't read, but just look for anything pertaining to dragons."

"What is it exactly you wish to learn?" asked a cold bass voice.

Startled, the hunters jerked around to behold a tall, thin figure clad in shades of jade and olive. The slanted eyes in the hairless, ascetic face were likewise a blank and luminous green. Vervevoran had assumed an approximation of human form to fit inside the temple.

"Brandobaris's dirk!" Will swore. "Don't sneak up on a fellow like that!"

"What is it you seek?" Vervevoran persisted.

"Information on the Rage," said Pavel. "We're trying to determine how to stop it."

"Then you're fools," the dragon said. "Nothing can stop it. Yet I owe you a debt for freeing me, so if you wish, I'll help you."

The transformed reptile stalked through the temple, scarcely breaking stride to gaze at the various sections of wall. Pavel wondered if Vervevoran could actually be perusing all that information so quickly. -

Glories of the sunrise, what manner of intellect could accomplish a feat like that?

Vervevoran pointed to a string of symbols and said, "Here. This is all there is, and it's merely the usual warning: 'When the King-Killer shines, then burns the Rage.'"

"It's not 'usual' to us," said Will. "What's the King-Killer?"

Vervevoran sneered but answered, "You don't even know that? It's a red star that appears in the sky every few centuries."

Will shook his head and said, "It's not there now."

"We already knew," Pavel said, "that Sammaster altered the elves' magic to suit his own purposes. They evidently tied this King-Killer to the enchantment, but he severed the link."

"It's a pity the undead whoreson was too impatient to wait for the star to return," the halfling said "This whole dung storm could have broken a century hence, when it would be somebody else's problem. Anyway, I guess the point is, what we just learned here is worthless"

For a moment, Pavel thought so too. Then he realized the possibilities.

"No," he said, smiling, "it gives us a cross-reference."

"A which?"

"A signpost, ignoramus. Something to guide us as we sift through the ancient lore. Now that we know the elf wizards drew power from the stars, we look for allusions to the King-Killer, and the heavens in general. With luck, it could save us tendays, even months of seeking."

Pavel turned to Vercevoran and said, "As could you. You've just demonstrated how valuable you could be. Let me explain exactly what's going—"

"Don't bother," the dragon said. "I don't care for the society of humans, my debt is paid, and I feel frenzy eating at my mind. I go to the Plane of Air, to wait out the Rage as my kind has always done."

The wyrm vanished, leaving only a fleeting ripple on the dusty air.